

# Tranquebar: Where Waves and Religions Sing

## Christian Identity & Community in A South Indian Town



*Bent Eilif Noddeland*

*Master Thesis*

*Institute of Social Anthropology*

*University of Oslo*

*Spring 2019*

© Bent Eilif Noddeland

Tranquebar: Where Waves and Religions Sing

Christian Identity & Community in A South Indian Town

2019

Bent Eilif Noddeland

<http://www.duo.uio.no/Trykk>: Reprosentralen, University of Oslo

# Table of Contents:

## Chapter 1: Introduction & Context

- The Place of Singing Waves
- Thesis Question
- Method
- The Field of Study
- History

## Chapter 2: Interreligious Coexistence

- Introduction
- Visual Symbols
- Greetings & Sociolect Differentiation
- Wedding Ceremonies
- Religious Holy Day Public Parades
- Pilgrimage
- Educational Institutions
- Mission activity
- Summary

## Chapter 3: Congregational Life

- Introduction
- Service & Mass
  - o TELC Services
  - o Catholic Mass
  - o Zion Prayer Hall Meeting
  - o Other Congregations of Interest
- Internal differences – TELC administrative & legal dispute
- Summary

## Chapter 4: Group Identities Beyond Denomination (Caste & Class, Gender & Family Relations)

- Introduction
- Caste & Class

- On Caste in the Church Space
- **Gender & Family Relations**
  - Gendered Privacy Spheres of the Home
  - Female Movement outside the House
  - On Women's Rank & Status Within the Churches
  - Men & Masculinity
- **Summary**

## **Chapter 5: Transnationality & Modernity**

- **Introduction**
- **A History of Transnationality**
- **The Tourism & NGO Industry**
- **NGO Work in Tranquebar**
  - Differences in Renovation Priorities
- **Tourism Industry in Tranquebar**
  - Confusions of Identity
  - The Concept of Ur and Justifying Belonging
  - Scepticism of Foreign Presence
  - Work Abroad & Remittances
  - Rumours
  - Rumours on Social Media
- **Summary**

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion & Religious Identity Revisited**

- **Recapitulation & Digest**
- **Closing Remark**

## **References**

# Chapter 1: Introduction & Context

## The Place of Singing Waves

It is roughly half past five in the morning as the sun breaks over the horizon. A pale red colours the morning clouds above Tranquebar, a still-sleepy coastal town along the Coromandel Coast in southern India, in the state of Tamil Nadu. The never-ending drone of waves that strike the town's beaches are disturbed for a moment by fishermen leaving the shore for their coastal fishing areas further out. If the weather permits it, they might already have left before the first light of dawn, to reach those far-out fishing spots that promise the best yield.

Suddenly, the intense sound of an old-fashioned air raid siren cries out across the town. A loud, blaring sound rings into houses through ventilation slits under the eaves, open windows covered by iron bars to keep monkeys out, or simply reverberating through the uninsulated brick walls themselves. It is not a warning of attack, but in fact preparing the Muslim faithful for the imminent call to prayer. When the call begins a few moments later, it is by contrast very soft, a sonorous cry carried from speakers atop of the New Mosque's minaret, praising the greatness of God, and leading its adherents in the first of the five daily prayers.

Not much later, the sound of bells ring from the New Rosary Church, just outside the town as well. Vastly enhanced by electric speaker systems -- much like the minaret's prayer call -- it reaches out across a large area, beckoning all who hear it to listen, though this time it is aimed at Catholic faithful. The ringing of the bells is followed by pre-recorded religious hymns in a local Carnatic style, emphasizing vocals with sharp pitches, not too different from the popular music that one might hear played on a radio, though its content is distinctly Christian.

If it is a Sunday, then it will be followed by more recorded music from another church, this time a Protestant one, the New Jerusalem Church, located in the very heart of the town along King Street. The song usually features the voice of a woman, and sometimes a man, rising and falling in the complex vocal stylings typical of Southern India, it carries with it a sense of intensity, vulnerability and sincerity apparent even to one that might not know much Tamil. A thoroughly Indian hymn to the Christian God. Only after a long while, perhaps more than an hour, will the music stop, eventually followed by church bells, this time unaided by speakers or electronics, just metal upon metal, calling the faithful to convene in worship of Jesus

Christ, as it has done in this exact spot for nearly three hundred years.

It seems almost paradoxical that the vast majority of this town are in fact not Christians or Muslims, but Hindus. Yet the auditory dominance of these minority religions do not seem much of a cause of consternation, aside, perhaps, from the odd person wishing the mornings were a bit quieter. It is simply a fact of life, as natural and mundane as anything else that takes place every day and every week. The waves crash, street peddlers cry out their wares as they walk through King and Queen streets, drivers honk their horns to warn pedestrians and other drivers, and the two Abrahamic religions let out their respective calls to prayer.

If one is somewhat more aware, or if one is in the vicinity of a “*kovil*”, a Hindu temple in the Tamil style, one might hear the sound of a hammer hitting a metal bell, a sign that a ceremony is about to take place within. This sound, however, is far less prevalent and spreads far less than the devotional music or prayer calls of Christians or Muslims, being sounded from the temple grounds behind walls and not from high towers or enhanced by modern technology. It is only really during the great Hindu festivals that the soundscape -- that is, the landscape described in terms of the spread and prevalence of sounds and auditory sensations [source] -- markedly changes and becomes dominated by sounds that can be related to Hinduism in a specifically religious sense.

The festivals vary greatly in character, but common features are the decoration of the kovils with added, colourful lighting and banana palms and other vegetative decoration. It is also a time for Hindu mantras to be projected by speakers placed around the major kovils, dedicated to the deity the festival is honouring. These mantras have many similarities to Christian prayers, in that they are praising a deity and calling upon their blessings and good fortune, but in the context of Tranquebar at least, they differ somewhat in that where prayers usually have a specific lyrical beginning and end, mantras are repeated again and again with great devotional intensity, sometimes over several hours. These festivals also feature religious music in the Carnatic style, which to an untrained ear like that of a visiting Scandinavian ethnographer with limited knowledge of Tamil, sound almost identical to the music played by the Christian churches in the area.

In many cases, festivals feature a mobile element, where “floats” or ostentatiously decorated trucks and carriages are driven or pulled through the streets, accompanied by dancers, singers and revellers. Hindu carriages or Muslim floats are driven past Christian, Muslim or Hindu houses, and the residents often come out to look and enjoy the sights. The people coming out

might even have sponsored the float of a different religion with some amount of cash before the festival started. Behind them dance or march children of various religious affiliation, enjoying the celebration and each other's' company. From the floats themselves come songs both sacred and profane, depending on the festival, which add to the impact of the presence of the floats, as the move throughout the town.

Tranquebar, or rather its original Tamil name *Tharangambadi*, translates through etymological roots to the phrase “The place of the singing waves”. This meaning, though perhaps somewhat fanciful and the result of a folk etymology, is believed to refer to the town's much celebrated beach which attracts both locals and tourists for both fun and relaxation and a break from the stifling South-Indian heat. However, during my stay there, I eventually came to the conclusion that it was not only a town defined by the songs of waves, but also the songs of people, as explored in the paragraphs above. Tranquebar, as I came to see it through my stay, was not only the place of singing waves, but the place of singing waves and singing people, and frequently, these songs come from religious sources, weaving together a complex social world of fluidity and border-maintenance, of coexistence, inclusion and exclusion.

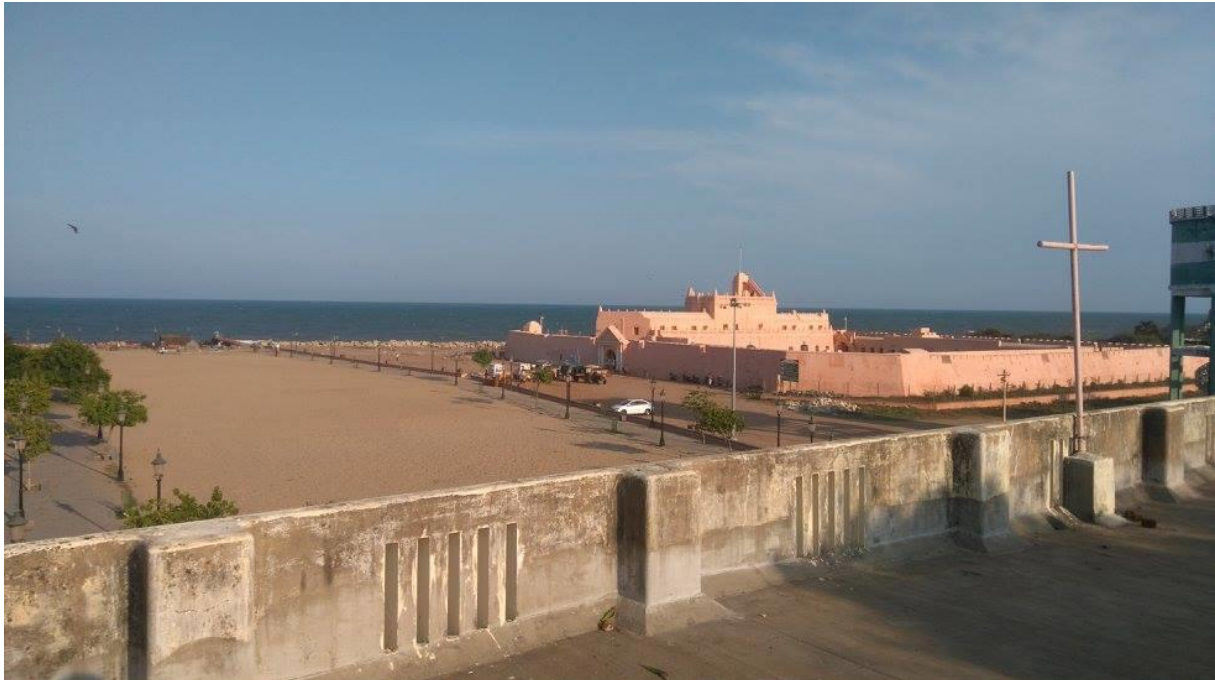


Figure 1 : View over the Dansborg Fort parade grounds.

## Thesis Question

The focus of my research was the identity and lived life of the Christians living in Tranquebar, and how they related to (1) other locally present religious groups (2), each other (3) as well as interacted across other social categories such as class, caste and gender, (4) and how they were situated in state & cross-national relations. In short, the question of the thesis pertains to the effects of Christian identity for those who carry it in Tranquebar.

It follows from this “multi-jointed” thesis question that my thesis does not have an overarching analytical perspective using a specific academic theory or a specific term through which everything has been gleaned. Instead, my fieldwork and subsequent analysis has been an attempt at a kind of “holistic” place-and-people ethnography, that focuses more on attempting to understand my informants’ lived lives as broadly as possible. This is not to say that there are no red threads in the thesis, as religion and religious identity, as outlines above serves as a unifying term and perspective.

Given that the thesis is primarily focused on religious identity, I will specify in which sense I use the term. There are a multitude of definitions of the phenomenon of religion, many of which have attempted to capture its essence in a succinct manner. The most famous of these is perhaps Geertz (1993) attempt to describe religion:

*“A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”* (p. 90-119)

While such essentialist, dictionary-friendly definitions can be useful for attempting to get to the core of the social function and appeal of religious thought and emotion, it, and others like it, were not hugely useful for my fieldwork. Instead, I have used religion in a much more practical, if perhaps inelegant, way. For the purposes of this chapter, and most of the thesis, I am focusing on the sociality of religion: by this I mean religion as a ascribed and self-ascribed group identity, as a community of people, and as an abstract category with cultural associations that shape the relations that those identified as Christians have with co-religionists as well as non-Christians. The questions of internally held beliefs and values have been less relevant to the kind of questions I have asked and to the kind of empirical evidence I found.



In this text I have divided the chapters as closely according to the sub-questions as I have been able. Continuing in the first chapter, there will be brief look into ethnographic methods utilized during the fieldwork, and the limitations surrounding them. Following that, there will be a more thorough introduction to the field site and its historical context.

Then, in the second chapter, I will discuss how Christians in Tranquebar coexist with non-Christian groups through shared cultural forms of expressing inclusivity and boundary-maintenance, and how Christians have formed a specific social niche with regards to education.

The third chapter will focus more closely on the inner workings of the different denominations and congregations of Tranquebar, and the differences between them, as well as the internal conflicts within specific congregations that I saw during my time there, using a specific denomination as an example.

The fourth chapter concerns how religious identity intersects with other identities, with a primary focus on the Indian caste systems and gender norms as they function locally, and how both tie into the Christian community and identity.

The fifth chapter concerns the issues of transnationality and modernity, with a primary focus on the mixed NGO- and tourism sectors, which have in recent decades brought not only new capital and work opportunities with them to Tranquebar, but also reactualized old colonial ties and relations. This has not been entirely without friction, and the chapter goes on to explore the confusion, uncertainty, and resentment that arises in these conditions.

The sixth chapter serves as a summary and conclusion to the thesis.

## **Method**

For my fieldwork, I drew on traditional and tried-and-true methods of ethnographic work, such as participant observation. As a technique, it involved not only joining others and socializing, but also maintaining some distance so as to be able to observe. Spradley (1980), notes how there are different modes of participant observation that range between all-consuming participation, and distance outsider observation. Through the course of my fieldwork, I shifted between different states as the situation demanded, trying to remain approachable to informants and respectful with regards to religious rituals, while also being able to take in the relevant information. Semi-structured interviews tended to organically form

out of participant observation, and I only rarely had the opportunity to fully prepare interview questions on paper, though I did so when interacting with informants who were either very busy, rarely in Tranquebar, or were otherwise important to arrive prepared for. This often included higher-ranking clergy, administrative personnel, and so on.

In the case of this thesis and the fieldwork that serves as its basis, the construction of a specific fieldsite that focused my attention on a social arena that was possible to “get to know” was important (Candea, 2007, p. 179-180), as my thesis focused on the effects of a certain identity within a certain place. While my attempt at holism can seem to hearken back to older works of anthropology that sometimes treated the fieldsite as existing apriori, it is important to emphasise the field as a construct of the ethnographer, not as a physical entity out in the world, as Madden (2010) sums up a field:

*The conceptualization of the interrogative boundary, that is to say, the questions that impel the ethnographer, overarch geographic considerations and tie diffuse, loose, separate, mobile or distant places together into a single ethnographic field of enquiry. (Madden, 2010, s. 39)*

A major challenge for me was language limitations. I had initially expected, based on e-mail correspondence with both the Danish Tranquebar Association and their local Tamil partners that English skills were widespread. This was to some degree correct, however it was largely limited to the middle and upper classes, who had received higher education, and were used to working with foreigners. Most adult locals, however, did not speak English with adequate proficiency. Over the course of several months I attempted to rectify this situations by learning conversational Tamil both by myself and with a tutor, but this proved to be too slow for it to have a significant impact on my ethnographic practice. The other option were interpreters, however I lacked the funds to fully employ anyone, nor were there always friends who could help me out, so my access to interpreter services was circumstantial – although highly appreciated when available. In the end, I attempted to work around this limitation by focusing on indirect sources, such as extensive descriptions of nonverbal cues, cross-referencing people’s expressed opinions during conversations, written sources, and so forth.

Through the Danish Tranquebar Association, I came into contact with who were to become my key informants, the Ebenezer family. I rented a room in their house, and would partake in their daily life, eating breakfast and dinner with them, and on several occasions travel with them to social functions. Residing with a native family does come with some problems, as it

shapes how others relate to you. It was clear that certain people already had placed me in a certain category as they learnt who I was lodging with, and this could alter what they told me. However, overall, the benefits of having daily access to locals who were more than willing to help me with translations, finding transport, telephone numbers and so on, far outweighed the downsides.

It became clear on many occasions that my very identity could be an issue, and this ties into the concept of social positioning. As a white adult man with an academic background, I was given a good deal of respect, which both opened doors for me, but also left some people more guarded. One man, during a conversation about why I was there, got the impression that “being in Tranquebar to research the Christian community” meant that I was some kind of theology scholar, there to pass judgment on whether they were good Christians or not. After that, I emphasized my purpose as “cultural researcher”, which seemed to be a less worrying term. My gender also made it harder to casually speak with women, though in this case I was unusually fortunate due to Mrs. Ebenezer and some other related women taking me under their wings.

Ethics are an important part of anthropological practice, the “do no harm” principle as it pertains to informed consent (Fluehr-Loban, 1994) was frequently on my mind. To this end, I vocally expressed my purposes for being in Tranquebar when I met prospective informants for the first time. Additionally, I would hold my notebook in plain sight during interviews, to non-verbally show the situation as well. Lastly, I have pseudonymized and anonymized several informants in the text per their wish, and in a number of cases where uncertainty was expressed. I have also added to that some changes in where certain things were said, when they were said and so forth, so as to further obscure informants’ identity.

### **The Field of Study.**

Tranquebar is the town in which I conducted a fieldwork during the period of January-July 2017. In practice, it became *an attempt* at a holistic exploration of the lives of my informants with a focus on their religious identity, and using the town of Tranquebar itself as a locus and main arena for studying the relations they were a part of and how they expressed their identity in various situations. I would occasionally travel outside of my self-defined field, but then always following the social connection of one or more of my informants. As such, this is both

an exploration of people and the place they inhabit, and conversely, an exploration of a place and the people that inhabit it.

The town is located about six hours by car, and several more if by public transport, from Chennai, the state capital of Tamil Nadu. It is a small town, occasionally referred to as a village or even hamlet by outsiders, with approximately twenty thousand inhabitants in its vicinity, surrounded by several villages of varying sizes. Some of these villages fall administratively under the Tharangambadi (ie. Tranquebar) “*taluk*”, or sub-district, for census, electoral, or utility service purposes (Indian Census Data, 2011, <http://www.census2011.co.in/data/subdistrict/5798-tharangambadi-nagapattinam-tamil-nadu.html>, accessed 29.11, 2018). Despite being the main taluk town with an officially designated town “*panchayat*”, or council, it is not the largest town there, the nearby town of Porayar being larger, and indeed Porayar is the actual location of the panchayat, holding mainly a titular relation to Tranquebar itself.

Tranquebar is part of the mostly Tamil-speaking Tamil Nadu state, formed out of Madras Presidency after the ethno-linguistic territorial reforms of India in 1956, which reorganized territory after linguistic borders, but kept the name, and 1969, when the name was changed. It is a town historically associated with fishing, and many of its residents are still fishermen, or work in sectors associated with fishing, such as fish sellers or engine maintenance. This sector, however, has been on the decline for several decades, and now many work or seek work in other sectors, while others again are working or have worked abroad, at least for a time, according to many conversations, both with older residents pointing out social change, and younger ones looking forward to opportunities elsewhere. Inland, several agricultural villages can be found, with practices ranging from subsistence gardens to large-scale plantation-style farms or fruit orchards with numerous employees.

The town is perhaps most well-known for its local landmark, the 17th century Danish Fort, a salmon-coloured square fortification, as well as a number of other 17th-18th century colonial buildings of mainly Danish origin, several of which were religious in function at some point, and some of which continue to be so to this day.

Upon entering the “town proper”, or “old town”, that is to say the densely-built area that is located within the limit of the now-largely gone town wall, one crosses a bridge over a 17th century moat now usually referred to as the Buckingham canal. On the other side stands the chalk-white town gate, referred to as the Land Gate, a partial translation of the Danish

“Landgaten”, or “country gate”. These are just a few of several historical buildings that often feature in promotional material or locally produced history pamphlets or books. (P. Maria Lazar, “Tales of Tranquebar”, 2010; M. A. Sultan, “Reminiscences of Tranquebar”, 2012 [2003]; Knud Helles, ed. “Tranquebar: Under Danish Rule”, 2013).

In addition to heritage architecture, the town is a target for local tourism due to its long, sandy beach, said to be healthy due to a larger than average ozone-content, which is believed to help with skin conditions. As such, it has at least two forms of attractions for tourists, though this is a steady trickle rather than an overwhelming flood, which come to enjoy its buildings and beaches. The tourist industry is catered to in several ways, with local hotels and guesthouses of varying quality, as well as at least two museums. One of these museums is within the Danish Fort itself, and the other is the Tranquebar Maritime Museum, which during my stay located to the former Danish Commander's House, a historical landmark in itself, which had recently been renovated with aid from the Danish Tranquebar Association. The tourism has however, not proven to be large enough to sustain several larger hotels, a couple of which stood empty and unused during my stay.

The population of the town, based on the governmental census of 2011 is mainly Hindu (77%) by a significant margin, with Christianity being the second-largest minority religion (11%), and Islam following closely (8,5%). (Indian Census Data, 2011, <https://www.census2011.co.in/>, accessed 20.05.2018). Compared to the census of 2001, the relative proportions have altered, from 85.8% Hindus, 7.5% Christians and 6.7% Muslims a decade earlier (Schönbeck, 2012, p. 58). Following these, a number of minor religious groups as well as non-religious make up the remainder. Given the focus of my fieldwork, the majority of my time was spent with Christians, though I came to know both Hindus and Muslims as well, and gained some information through such acquaintances as well.



Figure 2. Map of Tranquebar during the Danish colonial period

## History

The presentation of history in Tranquebar is subject to a number of considerations that make the creation of an “objective”, all-encompassing timeline or simple summary of events more complicated than it may seem at first glance (if indeed such a thing was ever possible anywhere). There are a number of reasons for this, which I will go through in brief before continuing.

For most of the modern era, most of the historical documents produced on the history of Tranquebar have been produced in Denmark, written in Danish, and occasionally in or translated to, English. Since most of these publications are written from the perspective of Danish national and historical interests, the period of Danish rule is greatly emphasized, and this may be to the marginalization of other periods. The time of Danish rule, with its 225 years, is after all a fairly short time frame when the entire human presence in the area is taken into account, and neither is it the most recent period which precedes the current, independent India.

The emphasis on the Danish period, however, is not purely a Danish fancy or obsessions with

yesteryear's colonial glory. In the present, many organizations present in Tranquebar look to the period of Danish rule as an element unique to Tranquebar, and this includes local entrepreneurs. That has not only influenced the town a great deal, but remains relevant to this day, as a unique selling point for the tourism industry, a point of local pride, and mark of relevance for monetary support for town maintenance and heritage preservation as a matter of national and local governmental and NGO-policy.

While the Danish period may be privileged beyond that of other periods, such as the ancient Chola period, the Pandyan period, the Thanjavur Nayak period, or the later British and post-Indian Independence periods, this cannot be brushed off *purely* as Eurocentrism or an effect of Danish or European neo-colonial gaze. While many locals cannot tell the history of buildings from the Danish period, instead relating to them through functions they have held in recent memory, or not being able to distinguish one colonial power from another (Jørgensen, 2014, p.253-256), there are local actors who embrace the emphasis on historical presence. It is a desirable perspective that brings in resources and interest, business opportunities, and help with everything from road maintenance to tsunami protection. This multiplicity of perspectives on history is the theme of Helle Jørgensen's 2014 book "Tranquebar: Whose History", which explores this topic in more detail than I can here. I have however, drawn heavily from how it seeks to include perspectives both scholarly and vernacular, as well as foreign, national and local on history and historicity in Tranquebar, as well as how these meet, and are consequently negotiated in the field from differing interests and agendas. With all of this in mind, it becomes clear that the history of Tranquebar as it is usually presented is not simply an account of historical events, but a remembrance of events that are seen as having significance in the present.

The first written records regarding the location later known as Tharangambadi or Tranquebar, come from a body of classical Tamil poetry known as Sangam literature, produced in the period between 600 BC and 300 AD, also known as a Golden Age of Tamil civilization. In these sources, one can find references to a port location in Porayar (Jørgensen, 2014, p.227). Today, Porayar is an inland town, a few kilometres inward from Tranquebar, and Tranquebar's location next to the mouth of the Uppanari River makes it a likely candidate for the port location mentioned in the text.

Indian sources also emphasize Tranquebar's proximity to the town of Poombuhar, about 15 kilometres further north, lying at one of the many mouths of the Kaveri River delta. Formerly



it was known as “*Kaveripoompattinam*” and is considered a port going back to the age of the Sangam epics as well (Jørgensen, 2014, p.229). Additionally, it was mentioned by classical geographers like Ptolemy, under the name “*Kaberis Emporion*”, (Nilavendan, 2012, p.1) which is a source of modern-day tourism promotion for the town, much like Danish presence is in Tranquebar. Human presence and complex trade relations have in other words existed in the region since at least classical times.

The earliest specific reference to Tranquebar as a locality itself comes from an inscription on the Masilamani Nathar kovil, a Hindu temple today located precariously on the edge of the shoreline, jutting out towards the rocky beach below, its terrestrial foundations continuously battered by the waves, though it once stood further inland. The inscription on the temple has been dated back to the temple’s construction in 1305 AD, on the order of the Pandyan King Maravarman Kulasekaran. It mentions the existence of a guild of merchants called “*pathinen visha ayattar*”, or “traders of eighteen countries”, and a reference to locally residing “*Karayar*”, a caste of seafarers who were known for overseas trading (Jørgensen, 2014, p.227-229). It is also the source of the first name of the locality, written as “*Sadankanpadi*”. This name is believed to have evolved into the modern form of Tharangambadi, variously also spelled Tarangampadi, Trangambadi, and so forth (Nilavendan, 2012, p.2).

Muslim traders are commonly held to have settled in Tranquebar from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and onwards. (M. A. Sultan, 2012, p.71; Grønseth, 2007, p.79 ). However, the sources that mention their arrival tend to mention how they purchased land to build a mosque on from the Danish. Conversely, Danish sources from the colonial era show a mosque present at the time of arrival, adding to something of a confusion, especially since the mosque trust and the Muslim community in general do not have any written records on these matters (Grønseth, 2007, p.79-80). Without speculating too much, it is possible that an already-present Muslim merchant community at some point got the permission to build a mosque, to renovate one, or simply acquired a formalized deed or charter from the new colonial landlords. It is also possible that the mosque mentioned in these stories is the same that today is called the Old Mosque, or that the adjacent Sufi *dargah* (saintly shrine) is from this period as well.

In 1618, the Danish East Indian Company, a chartered trading company modelled on similar European ventures, set sail for “the Indies” at the behest of the king of Denmark-Norway, Christian IV. The small fleet was led by Danish admiral Ove Gjedde, and was originally headed for Sri Lanka, in order to negotiate a trade deal there, however, after this deal did not



yield the expected results, the fleet set sail for the Indian mainland along the country's eastern coast, called the Coromandel. In 1620, the Danish fleet arrived in India, and on the 19<sup>th</sup> November of the same year, a treaty was signed between Ove Gjedde (on behalf of King Christian IV of Denmark-Norway) and Raghunatha Nayak, the ruler of Thanjavur (Tanjore) and surrounding areas. The treaty, written on gold leaf and featuring the Nayak's signature in Telugu script, allowed the Danes to settle a stretch of land by the mouth of a river, and to fortify this, against an annual tribute to the Nayak of Thanjavur. Such an arrangement was not unique, being similar to the one signed between Dutch and local rulers in nearby Nagapattinam, as well as several other trading posts along the coast. The establishment of these initial trading colonies in India show that early colonization of India was not yet a unilateral process, but involved careful manoeuvring and negotiation, and that local rulers did possess agency in these processes. They hoped to capitalize on increased tax revenue through European trade, as well as potentially attaching themselves to foreign powers in order to overcome local rivals, and at least initially, the treaties were viewed as mutually beneficial (Nilavendan, 2012, p.2; Danish Tranquebar Association, <http://www.foreningen-trankebar.dk/145955962>, retrieved 30.11.18).

Shortly after the treaty had been signed, the Danes began fortifying their colony by building Dansborg Fort, which today is the main landmark of the town, often portrayed on travel brochures and other material designed to attract tourists. In addition to the fort, a town wall was built around the colony, punctuated by several larger bastions bearing cannons, and a moat was dug. The moat is today connected to the sea only in one end, and is known as the Buckingham Canal, over which the main entrance to the town proper lies in the form of a bridge. The Danish would hold sway over this fortified town, and some of the surrounding land, for 220 years (Jørgensen, 2014, p. 54).

Christians existed in the area before the territorial lease to the DEIC, possibly established in the after Portuguese Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier de Nobili traversed through the area from Portuguese Goa and eastwards in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Mosse, 2012, p.4-8). What is known is that by 1620, when the Danes settled the area, a Portuguese priest was tending a congregation of local converts (Schönbeck, 2012, p4-6). However, with the arrival of the Danes, Protestantism was introduced for the first time, not only in Tranquebar, but on the Indian Subcontinent. Initially this "introduction" was merely in the form of the Dansborg garrison's chaplains, who exclusively saw to the spiritual needs of the soldiery and Company employees. The Danish East Indian Company, much like the trading companies of other

countries active in India at the time, were primarily concerned with ensuring profit first and foremost, and did not conduct missionary work, and indeed opposed the idea as a threat to their bottom line, as it could cause social unrest.

In India, the notable exception to the absence of Christian missioning was the Portuguese-Vatican cooperation of joint trade-colonization and missioning known as the “*Padroado Real*” (Royal Patronage). Under this agreement, simply put, Catholic missionary work was “outsourced” to the Portuguese Crown, who in turn employed a number of Catholic religious orders to do the concrete legwork of proselytizing. In India, the Jesuits (Society of Jesus) came to pre-eminence among Catholic missionary orders, of which Francis Xavier was a member. In Tranquebar, this situation of religious non-interference from the Danes was to last for over 80 years, but things would eventually change. In 1701, the Zion Church was built, the first Protestant religious facility outside the fort itself, and more Christianizing influences were on their way (Schönbeck, 2012, p117)

Possibly as a consequence of the ongoing Pietist movement of Lutheran and Calvinist churches in Northern Europe, King Frederick IV of Denmark-Norway decided to sponsor a missionary effort to India in 1701. Eventually, after a lack of willing candidates who dared brave the potential hazards of a long sea journey and tropical diseases after arrival, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, a German clergyman, along with his former co-student of theology, Heinrich Plütschau, accepted the position. The two arrived in Tranquebar on the 9th of July 1706, and established a Lutheran mission in the town, under the direct protection of the Danish king, and thus technically independent of the Danish East Indian Company Commander. The New Jerusalem Church was inaugurated in 1718, and bore the personal seal of Frederick IV himself, as a sign of the royal patronage (Jørgensen, 2014, p.55).

By the late 1700s, Tranquebar was undergoing a boom-period, with rapid economic growth. It was during this period that the Commander’s House, a building by the parade grounds in front of the Fort that still stands, and which was renovated in 2017 to become the new Tranquebar Maritime Museum, was originally built, among other facilities (Jørgensen, 2014, p.56). This boom period was to be short-lived however, and as Denmark-Norway was drawn into the Napoleonic wars, Tranquebar was occupied in 1801-1802, and again in 1808-15. During the turn of the century, Norwegian Peter Anker was governor of the colony, and gathered with him a large collection of indigenous artworks, as well as drawing and painting a number of illustrations of the Indian landscape, people and monuments himself. Many of these works

and items would go on to form a core of the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History's collection (Norwegian Biographical Encyclopaedia, [https://nbl.snl.no/Peter Anker - 2](https://nbl.snl.no/Peter_Anker_-_2), retrieved 04.12.18). After the victory of the Anti-Napoleonic Coalition, Tranquebar was handed back from British occupation, but the Danes had to pay a 16% toll on all wares leaving Tranquebar, another nail in the coffin of what had once been expected to be a successful business venture. Denmark-Norway offered to sell the colony to Britain in 1815, but it would not be until 1845 that the transaction was finally complete – ending the Danish period (Jørgensen, 2014, p.57).

Initially after the British takeover, Tranquebar reportedly served as the District Collector's Office for the Thanjavur District during the period of 1845-60, the District Collector being a local administrator whose most important duty was overseeing tax collection for the British Indian Civil Service. It is however possible that Tranquebar only served as the Collector's summer residence, and only had a secondary administrative function, though this is subject for debate. It was also the location of the Thanjavur District and Sessions Court in the period of 1860-72, and after a brief interruption again in 1878-84. Such administrative functions do show that Tranquebar continued to have some importance, contrary to the modern-day image of an abrupt and sudden social change after the transfer from Danish control. It is undeniable however; that Tranquebar gradually became increasingly irrelevant as far as wider regional administration and commerce was concerned as the 1800s neared its end (Jørgensen, 2014, p.57).

In 1926 Tranquebar attained railway connectivity, a point of local pride, as it not only increased the potential for commercial activity by reducing travel times drastically, but also because the railway was emblematic for ideas of technological progression and modernity. Being connected to the rail was being touched by the region's growing development and prosperity, a perception that must have been strengthened in 1947, when India became independent of the British, ending not only the British period in Tranquebar, but indeed the colonial experience as a whole – at least formally. The railway would remain important for commerce and personal transport until it was cut off in 1986, to local protests and much displeasure, though the local line to Tranquebar had at that time become little used except by the locals (Jørgensen, 2014, p.57, 69).

The 1980s saw ongoing water crises in the state of Tamil Nadu, which was clashing with the neighbouring state of Karnataka over the regulation of the Kaveri river drainage basin which

flows through both states. As Karnataka was developing its own agriculture and damming up the river for hydroelectrical purposes, the decreased water flow caused a reduction in water supply, higher groundwater salinity and decreased agricultural output in the downriver portions of Tamil Nadu, where Tranquebar is located. While an agreement has been met between the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and western Kerala states, drinking water is today supplied to every house by truck, where it is stored in a tank on the roof. There are, additionally, public wells, which are in use by both day-labourers as well as poorer households; they are however subject to both salinity problems, and seasonal variation in water levels (Jørgensen, 2014, p.70).

In recent decades, Tranquebar's significance in the eyes of outsiders has mostly been due to its past, and by extension, what this promises for the future. Danish travellers, academics and tourists have continued to turn up to document the town in various ways, ranging from personal photographs, to writing articles about Danish colonialism in historical journals, or even entire ethnographies. The town was declared a Special Tourism Area by the government of Tamil Nadu in 1992, not so much as a statement of reality, but rather to hopefully create the conditions to promote development of the tourism and heritage industries there in the future (Jørgensen, 2014, p.61). Accordingly, the town has been the site of many and frequent archaeological surveys of its many historical buildings, both of pre-colonial and colonial origins, though since it is the town's Danish period which makes it stand out from nearby locales, the Danish-era buildings are most frequently given the most attention. Such surveys, often covering the same buildings repeatedly, but from different organizations and agencies, can be a source of irritation and frustration for locals (Jørgensen, p60-61, 63).

In recent local and regional history, the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004 has an important place. Its effects, both directly as well indirectly, have been profound. As it rolled over the low-lying coastline of Tamil Nadu, it killed hundreds of people in the Tranquebar area. Most records of deceased individuals exceed 300 and a monument to the dead list 315 by name, a staggering number for what was by this point a small local community. In all of India, the total number of dead reached over 12,400. Additionally, 1,170 out of 1,750 registered households in Tranquebar received damage, ranging up to complete destruction and forcing people into temporary shelters, and eventually to a large-scale relocation of the fishermen community, who had traditionally lived close to the sea shore. As the water receded, the very physical coastline was altered, with an entire street along the coast crumbled away into the sea, and

sandbars covering a previous outlet for the river. The Masilamani Nathar temple, the oldest building in the area, had been badly damaged as well, teetering perilously on its crumbling foundations, protected only by a crumbling ruin of colonial-era brickworks jutting out into the sea (Jørgensen, 2014, p. 81-82, 95).

Both Jørgensen and I both experienced the significance of the tsunami as we spoke with our respective informants. Jørgensen reported being shown newspaper clippings of the disaster relief work, album pictures of friends and family lost to the disaster (2014, p.84). I was allowed to copy the contents of an entire USB-stick with hundreds of images from newspapers and personal photos that depicted the dead lain in rows on the ground during the recovery work, and scanned articles documenting both the event itself and the relief work in the aftermath. Stored digitally were also videos of news reports and home videos from this time, allowing us some small measure or insight into the deeply, personally, and relatively recent traumatizing event. It was a topic of conversation that I approached hesitantly, not wanting to push the matter, but my informants were open and willing to explain it in harrowing detail. Included in this were retellings of life-stories, of how such-and-such used to live by the sea, but had moved out just a few months before the tsunami hit. The fishermen village by the sea, which was previously contiguous with the colonial-core town centre, was still mostly abandoned 15 years later, during my fieldwork, being littered with ruins and overgrown paths. The people had been relocated further inland, and few desired to rebuild on old plots.

In the aftermath of the tsunami, however, followed a great deal of interest in Tranquebar, and activity there. It was in this period that organizations became involved with the heritage-protection and social projects in the town, or where organizations, which had been previously active in the area, intensified their work there. Most notable are INTACH (the Indian Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) in cooperation with the Danish Bestseller Foundation, a private philanthropic foundation tied to the Danish clothing company Bestseller (which owns such brands as Vero Moda and Jack & Jones) became involved in several projects. Such projects ranged from restoring the town's various historical buildings to initiating a number of projects meant to create economic opportunities and invigorate local civil society. It was also the tsunami that prompted the members of the Danish Tranquebar Association, which had existed since 2002, to take a more hands-on approach, and work to create a tsunami barrier along the coast, and to refurbish the Dansborg Fort – both projects that were eventually continued by

governmental agencies (Jørgensen, 2014, p.81-82). In the following months and years, the Fishermen received new houses further inland, and a number of glass fibre boats to replace their losses, infrastructure was worked on, social projects initiated, there was an influx of job opportunities with NGOs or governmental agencies in need of local laborers, an increasingly well-known public profile which also attracted more tourists. Jørgensen, in her assessment of the tsunami disaster, argues that it was a “total social phenomenon” in Maussian terms. It reached across nearly all facets of life, from concrete physical changes, to commercial, social and psychological ones as well. Both Negative and positive (2014, p.85-86).

Shortly after in 2006, the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church celebrated the Tercentenary of the Protestant Mission in Tranquebar, marking it from the moment Ziegenbalg and Plütschau arrived in 1706. The celebratory events were supported by the Danish state, and it saw the erection of a gold-coloured statue of Ziegenbalg by the junction of King and Queen Streets, by the corner of the parade grounds. The New Jerusalem Church was renovated with donations from the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of America (ELCA), after they initially visited Tranquebar in the aftermath of the tsunami (Jørgensen, 2014, p. 65).

## Chapter 2: Interreligious Coexistence

### Introduction

In this chapter I will look at the various ways in which Christians in Tranquebar communicate their religious identity, and how they enter into a shared practice of displaying and communicating this kind of group identity which is also practiced by other religious groups. I will furthermore go from purely static symbols, to forms of behaviour, to institutional practices in the form of schools and how they act as arenas where predominantly Christian-run institutions meet with predominantly Hindu students. I will argue that certain forms of religious communication is so common and so omnipresent that it is almost unnoticeable, or at least not worthy of much consideration – while more active forms of identity-communication requires a more conscious kind of border-management. I will attempt to progress the chapter from less contentious and more fluid and common forms of religious markers, towards practices where border-maintenance and exclusivity is more clearly marked, and border-maintenance is more strongly practices.

Like so many other places in India, Tranquebar is a town filled with signifiers of denominational and religious belonging. These span across different social spheres and are embedded into different social practices, from behaviours, to clothes, forms of house decoration, and the more explicit markers such as the religious institutions that are such a prominent part of the townscape. The Christians of Tranquebar are a part of this landscape, and in many ways follow the same underlying logic of identity-signalling that other groups do.

### Visual symbols

During my fieldwork, I would frequently start my day with a walk through the streets, deliberately choosing different routes to not only explore and to familiarize myself with the place, but also to turn myself into a staple of the daily life there. To hopefully turn myself from an exotic outsider with the strange purpose of ethnographical research to something unremarkable and mundane through my ubiquity. Of course, meeting and speaking with

people along the way was a decent way of gathering informants, and frankly, to just have a nice time.

Leaving the door of my rented room, however, and passing through the garden gate and out onto Rani Street, with its infrequent traffic of bikes, motorbikes and perhaps even the occasional car, I was met with the myriad of ways in which religious affiliation. These symbols and signifiers may seem overwhelming at first, especially to an outsider like myself – but in practice they had simply achieved what I sought to do: because they were everywhere, all the time, and in so many forms, they had become mostly unremarkable.

Walking down one of the back streets of Rani Street, I passed a block of houses which could serve as a microcosm of the general atmosphere of Tranquebar as I came to know it. Situation next to each other were several houses which clearly communicated the different religious identity of those living inside. On the first of the houses, a wrought-iron gate was decorated with a large, gold-painted cross in the middle. The nearby wall pole had the name «Salem House” written onto it, a reference to a Biblical town. A few houses down, a metal plaque decorated with images of Jesus was screwed up next to the front door, and another house would have a cut-out picture of him stuck to the door itself. Walking down any of the streets in the area will yield similar views, sometimes more explicit, sometimes more subtle. In one case, I found a banner from a former Catholic event hung up along the side of someone’s front terrace. It depicted a crowned Virgin Mary cradling the baby Jesus, both in colourful clothing and with beatific expressions on their faces, surrounded by Tamil writing. Whatever its former purpose, it was now a striking visual decoration for anyone passing by. Right next to a partition wall woven from banana tree leaves.

Immediately next door to “Salem House” lies a house in striking colours of pink, yellow and white. Screwed onto the gate pole of its front wall is a plaque of the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesha. Behind the front wall, next to the front door of the house is a small alcove or depression in the wall. Inside this, come night, a container of fragrant wood sticks in an oil container, or just the oil by itself, will be lit, giving an offering to the deities worshipped by the family living within the residence. The small shrine’s orange-yellow flickering flame melding with the stark yellow and white cones of the streetlights themselves. In other parts of the town, a house may even have a in image of a deity, or one of the many messengers of the gods, painstakingly sculpted into the fence or wall itself, painted in all the vivid colours of the rainbow, and looking out on the street. Its purpose, whether to ward off evil spirits, to confer



its blessings upon those living inside melds with that of signalling the beliefs and traditions practiced by the house's owners, though not necessarily intentionally.

Further down the street, a house in green and yellow sits, and similarly bears visual designs that help elucidate the religious denomination of those living inside. It, however, does not bear any images of any deities or spirits, or holy figures – graven or otherwise – but rather has expertly engraved calligraphy flowing over the entry door. The text, in the Arabic script, is likely not readable to many in the town, nor to myself, but it carries a clear message: this is a Muslim household. Helping to make this message clear is the crescent moon embracing a five-pointed star sculpted or painted onto the wall of the house, or the outer wall around the plot itself. A glyph representing the Prophet Muhammad's miraculous night-time journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, and back again.

Together with burning oil, wall-embedded shrine, divine images, crosses and crucifixes and house-names, the calligraphy and moon-and-star serves a public message of religious affiliation and belief. One could be forgiven then, for thinking that these decorations are controversial or provocative in nature, but no one really pays them much attention. There are so many of them, and they have been there for such a long time, that whatever potency for reaction they might've held appears to be gone. In other words, they simply appear mundane and humdrum. Nice to look at, and probably a point of some pride for the owners, but not something anyone gets too excited about. Reading them in such a way, it is tempting to draw parallels to Michael Billig's "Banal Nationalism" (1995), wherein the author critically analyses the seemingly non-noteworthy items as expressions of patriotism, national pride, and nationalism. The symbols on our cash, government-issued stamps, flag-decorations for holidays, or even the flag that sits folded up in a closet somewhere are but a few examples of displays of the nation as an important and naturalized part of people's lives. In fact, that they have become so unremarkable is testament to their strength as unspoken signifiers – hence the use of the term "banal" (Billig, 1995, p.4-6)

Tranquebar, with its multireligious landscape, does not mirror a nation-state in the usage of identity-signifying symbols, of course. Where Billig's national symbols in practice have a monopoly, the Christian, Hindu and Muslim symbols in Tranquebar exist alongside and intermingled with each other. This mingling can even exist so closely that many cars and autos (the three-wheeled transport vehicles utilized for short-distance commercial travel, similar to a tuk-tuk) had an image of the Virgin Mary and the Baby Jesus right next to a figurine of Ganesha. In one case, when I first rode a taxi down from Chennai, could see a

Hindu mother goddess figure flanked by one of the Virgin Mary, and hanging above them, from the rear-view mirror, was a crucifix and a crescent moon symbol. “It is no problem!” insisted the driver when I asked him about it. From our further comments, it seemed that he, as well as other drivers, just found it to be a sound investment to have all their bases covered, so to speak. And, true to his comment, such mingling of symbols – at least by private individuals on a small scale – did indeed not seem to be a problem.

Rather than Billig’s state-sponsored, ubiquitous, unspoken-and-thus-taken-for-granted-nationalism, the use of religious symbols exists side-by-side in a pluralistic landscape in Tranquebar. None of them can truly ever hope to be so ever-present that they crowd out the others. Rather it is not only their presence, but also their closeness and interaction that becomes – in Billig’s words – “banal”. This further ties into the Indian concept of secularism. Unlike how the term is often used in Europe and the West, it does not just denote the idea of separation of religion and state, and is even further distinguished from the Francophone idea of “laïcité” where religious imagery is supposed to be separated from the public sphere altogether. Rather, in Indian political and daily discourse, secularism more or less means the ideal of respecting the public presence of all religions equally (Rizvi, 2005, p. 901-902). The bold display of religious symbols, behaviour and ritual in the public sphere is not antithetical to secularism, as it would be in a laïcité-perspective, but rather is congruous with it, provided that this freedom of expression and presence is provided on equal terms. At least ideally.

When moving on from static symbols and into more immediately active practices, such as speech, we will see some similarities, but also some added levels of differentiation.

### **Greetings & Sociolect Differentiation**

While enjoying my daily walks around the town, and in-between taking in the different forms of decoration that could be found, I would often come across others. Sometimes they would be out on some busy errand, while other times they would be relaxing in the shade and relative breeze outside their homes. Some late evenings during the summer, I would even come across people who were making ready to sleep on their porches to help alleviate some of the oppressing heat, rolling out thin straw-mats onto the cement floor, or hanging up hammocks.

During casual meetings, I wanted to give off the impression of the impeccably polite and affable visitor, someone who inspired trust and friendliness. This was at least partially cynical on my side, as I thought it would make it easier to find new informants that I could speak with, hang out with and interview, but on a more immediate level it was also simply a desire to be well-liked, to have pleasant interactions with people, and in general have an enjoyable stay.

Perhaps the main tool for giving a good first impression is simply to perform a suitably friendly and polite greeting; therefore, this was something I inquired my main informants about early on.

“How do people say hello to each other here in Tranquebar?” I asked my Akka (“Big Sister”, an affectionate term for my landlady, which she had told me to call her. In return, I was Tambi, or “little brother”). “Oh, mostly we say ‘vannakam’,” Akka said, but then after some thought added: “But there are different ways, we Christians say ‘stotram’ to each other, it is our greeting.”

In fact, there were several different greetings, and some of them tied into the religious belonging of the greeters. In general, “vannakam” was the general term for “hello” or “greetings”. It was considered largely religiously neutral by my informants, and something which could be said by, and said to, just about anyone regardless of status or age as well. It was often accompanied by the common hand gesture known as “Anjali Mudra”, where both palms are pressed towards each other, forming a kind of fingertip-spire. This gesture, one of a series of traditional hand gestures, or mudras, has been popularized mainly through the North-Indian Hindi greeting “namaste”, which “vannakam” is more or less considered the Tamil equivalent of. As I walked past women hanging up their clothes wash, or an elderly man enjoying music from the radio on a plastic chair outside the front door, I would often nod my head in their direction and say vannakam, initially to many people’s pleasant surprise, and to children’s delight. Since I was often carrying something in one of my hands, whether it was my canvas bag containing my notebook and recorder, or a flimsy plastic bag containing groceries on my way back from the market, I was told that it was considered acceptable to simply use one hand in the gesture, with the other hand being merely implied, for practical reasons. Many of the people I met returned the gesture one-handedly, in a casualised , everyday manner, although always with the right hand, as greeting with the left hand can be considered impolite, as it is the dirty hand – associated with the cleaning of one’s backside after visits to the toilet. As a left-handed person, I learnt this through failure, though I was

corrected politely, if immediately. In general, my left-handedness was a bit of a curiosity, and while I stopped to speak with people, occasionally forgetting myself and reached for a cup of tea, or started taking notes with my left hand, the conversation would frequently shift to this strange habit of mine.

As someone who mainly frequented Christian social gatherings, rented a room at a Christian family's house, and was a white European who spoke English, I was usually socially parsed as a Christian by the people I spoke with. I generally accepted this designation, as not only was it convenient for my fieldwork in many aspects, but I am also a member of the Norwegian Lutheran Church and have a religious upbringing. This sometimes affected how people would greet me. Occasionally, someone would greet me with the word "stotram", a term that was used only between Christians. Roughly meaning "praise", it was meant as a greeting from one Christian to another, and I never heard any non-Christians use it. The Anjali mudra was also used in this greeting, showing an overlap in oral and manual components of the various greetings. Those who saw me reciprocate this greeting were often also quite excited. Once, upon hearing me utter it without being prompted, an old man made sure to show me a large crucifix he was wearing around his neck, and spoke excitedly to me in heavy dialectal Tamil, which I was sadly unable to converse with him in. Despite our linguistic paucity, however, we were able to find some kind of mutual understanding: we had expressed our Christianity to each other, and through that a closer kind of relations had been formed than would otherwise have been. I often passed by his house, and tried my best to engage in small talk, for example pointing to the work being done on his roof, to which he nodded in a good-natured way, or asking him what he had eaten with the stock phrase "sapitingela", a common topic as readily offered by my informants as talking about the weather or asking about one's general well-being would be in many western countries. While we could not really speak together properly, but it was nice to pass by and offer greetings to each other.

In Mosque Street, and in several of the shops in Market Street, or while meeting domestic tourists come to enjoy the beaches around the Danish Fort, I often met Muslims, and as with Christians, they too had a greeting phrase that was considered typical for them. "Salaam Aleikum", or "Peace be with you" is not Tamil, but Arabic, however it was fully integrated into the Tranquebarian lexicon, and played into the system of orally conveyed social differentiation that greetings were a part of. While I was never taken to be a Muslim myself, I did occasionally use the phrase when visiting a Muslim-owned shop, passing by a Muslim

woman outside her home in the street, or even when walking past a group of two or more niqab-clothed women on the narrow sidewalks of King Street. My greetings would sometimes prompt surprised looks, or nervous giggling, but just as often an enthusiastic response. Contrary to my own preconceptions, the niqab-clad women, whose entire bodies save for their eyes were hidden by the black, heavy garments, did not seem to shy away from merrily offering a loud “Aleikum salaam” back.

While greetings, as outlined above, represent a simple and manageable example of sociolectal differences that delineate religious belonging, they were a part of a larger corpus of such terms. The usage and interpretation of varying terms is likely to be dynamic, and newer or older generation may hold different opinions on what a term signifies. Simply because only some speakers interpret terms in this or that way does not necessitate that all members of the same social arena (in this case defined as the physical space of Tranquebar, and the interactions that occur between the people interacting within) others interpret them the same way.

To borrow from Barth’s conception of culture as a form of knowledge through the metaphorical example of a “stream”: this collective knowledge is unevenly distributed, or rather people are embedded into it in varying degrees. Some may be deeply steeped in the middle of the stream, while others may simply be wading in the shallows, as it were. In other words, though people are a part of the same lifeworld, share many of the same ideas and concepts, they will be impacted or understand this knowledge differently based on a host of factors (Eriksen, 2007, p.1056). Specific speech-forms serve as examples however, to further elucidate additional behavioural and cultural forms which fit into similar modes of inclusion-exclusion, which could range from essentially open to everyone even if headed by a particular religious group, all the way to completely closed-off religious practices only open to members of the faith group in question.

Following are examples of a number of practices which show the shared social expression of relative openness, but also where such relatively open practices put down delineations.

### **Wedding Ceremonies**

Early on in my fieldwork, I came in contact with the Ziegenbalg Spiritual Centre, located opposite the New Jerusalem church, and also owned and operated by the TELC. It performs a

number of services for the TELC and local community, as explained to me by Justin, the administrator of the centre, including hosting pastoral candidates, managing a small bookstore with Christian books and DVDs, holding courses for locals on various subjects (such as health, environment, leadership for women, etc.). Additionally, the Centre contained a wedding hall called Martyria Hall, as well as an open area around which lay a dining hall. These facilities were open to be rented by anyone for their needs, regardless of religious affiliation. I asked the current centre director, Justin, about this, and he explained that most of the commercial wedding halls in the area were too expensive for the poorer people, and so he saw it as a good deed to provide a wedding hall at a cheaper price. He did not see a problem with renting out to non-Christians, or for non-Christians to conduct their religious ceremonies in Martyria hall, itself a place a chapel and place of Christian worship.

A couple of weeks later I would see this policy in practice, as I witnessed a parade coming down King's Street. Led by a truck with speakers, the parade consisted of a marching band and several revellers, as well as a masked mascot of some kind who did mischief and entertained - or terrified - the children along the street. In the middle was a car with the bride and groom, who had come from Hindu ceremonies at a temple outside town. They had rented the Martyria Hall to conduct a traditional presentation of gifts for the enthroned couple, and to host the wedding feast, which would be attended by visitors. While I furiously scribbled down my notes during the wedding, I was asked if I wanted to join by someone who claimed to be a friend of the family. I declined, afraid I would be intruding, and still being somewhat shy. the wedding parade was clearly a public spectacle, as people lined the streets, and many more guests than could be accommodated at once came and went from Martyria hall and its dining hall.

During my time in Tranquebar, only one Christian wedding took place in Martyria hall to my knowledge, which I sadly was not able to attend. I was, however, told by the informants I lived with that Christian wedding ceremonies usually had more of a program with speeches and songs, than Hindu ones, which largely consisted of the gift-giving and following dinner. This of course, would in both cases be in addition to the actual wedding ceremony which took place in church and Hindu temple, respectively. I was able to attend a Hindu wedding in Martyria hall, after I had attended a Hindu wedding outside of town in a commercial event hall.

As I walked up to the seated bride and groom alongside an older, male informant to present a small sum of money and to take a picture with the couple, I could not help notice the

juxtaposition of Christian symbology on the walls, the Hindu-style thrones and decoration, as well as seeing at least two Muslim women wearing niqabs seated with their children among the attendees. As we went to eat in the dining hall afterwards, I realized that my inability to properly eat the lamb masala with only one hand was much more of a cause for curiosity than someone dressing up in a holy space in the finery of another faith, and for members of a third faith to attend in their particular garb.

While it would be naive to claim an absence of religious or sectarian conflict in Tranquebar, it was becoming clearer to me that disagreements were usually multifaceted, rarely, if ever, explained by single cleavages or differences. In general, the different religions did not treat each other as potential intruders, the movements of which had to be managed or kept under surveillance, but rather as elements that were expected to be, in some sense, mobile and whose borders - both socially and spatially - were at least to some extent fluid. Of course, the public nature of these wedding ceremonies, or at least the fact that they are less exclusive than a Norwegian-style wedding, does raise the question of whether it is simply a case of weddings and certain other instances being exceptions to an otherwise clearly delineated religious coexistence. Based on empirical evidence from many different occasions, however, I would say that some level of fluidity to the “borders” of religious interaction was accepted as a fact of life. That is, not necessarily unproblematic, but not outright threatening either.

The inclusive nature of public displays of religiosity will be explored more in the following part.



*Figure 3. Hindu parade in the month of March.*

### **Religious Holy Day Public Parades**

All the major religious groups in Tranquebar organize parades through the town streets for holy occasions, most often down the King and Queen Streets, as they form a central axis that passes through most of the commercial and residential centres of Tranquebar. These parades



are joyous, celebratory events, and are always public, either in the sense that anyone can join, that anyone is invited to watch, that they are funded by gifts from any of the other religious communities – or, at its basic level, that they occur in the most public of all spaces: the ordinary street.

The Hindus are most numerous and have the most parades. On several occasions during the year they parade wagons – or truck-mounted icons of gods and historically important people through the streets, while singing, dancing and playing music. During one such occasion, they stopped outside the house I lived in, which is owned and inhabited by a Christian family, and one of the parade groups performed a particularly difficult dance, which we applauded and hooted excitedly over. A man on the top of the icon-carrying truck improvised song lyrics with me in mind, connecting my presence to Tranquebar's colonial history with the Danish. I was told by my hosts who acted as Tamil interpreters that it was positive, but I also suspect it was tongue-in-cheek and at least a little bit mocking (if good-natured) given the secretive smiles of my informants.

The Muslims arrange a same kind of parade at least once a year to my knowledge. This includes a very large gold-coloured “tower” pulled on its own wagon, and non-figurative icons. This particular parade occurs on Eid-al-Fitr, marking the end of the Muslim holy month Ramadan. A while before the parade, a Muslim family arrived at the door of my host-family's house, and they were given some money from the Christians to fund their Eid parade, which “grandmother”, the oldest family member in the household, provided. The Muslim women, expressing thanks, left the house soon thereafter. The parade itself is often followed by children of all ages and religions and is a spectacle for all to see. The end of it, however, takes place inside the mosque, and is open only to Muslims, thus, in some sense, the dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion is paired with the idea of public-private spaces of street and house of worship.

Christians also practice similar forms of parading at various times of the year. From what I could tell, the Catholics are the most active in this respect. To mark the inauguration of a new higher-ranking Catholic cleric, a group of Catholics pulled a mounted icon of the Virgin Mary through the streets with a petrol generator on the small wagon, powering a loudspeaker and neon lights around the holy figure itself. Catholics also pulled carts along the main roads outside town when going on pilgrimages. Though this was less a street parade and more of a long-distance trek, it sometimes attracted bystanders and appeared much as a parade when passing through other towns or villages.

During Easter, an ecumenical parade involving the TELC, the CS and the Catholic Church was organized, where Christians paraded from outside the city by the Catholic Church to the town centre. A truck with a speaker set and a mounted cross on top served as a kind of holy icon or float like those of the Hindus or Muslims. People carried banana plant leaves shaped into the form of a cross, and sang Christian hymns. After participating in the parade, I and the other celebrators ended up outside the New Jerusalem Church and had tea and biscuits among the long banana-leaf garlands hanging between the church and nearby palm trees. I did not see any of the non-Christian audience join us on the church grounds, somewhat similarly to how the Muslim community turned inward at the Mosque after its Eid parade.

What we see from the above examples is that while Hindus, Christians and Muslims in Tranquebar worship different deities, they express that worship in similar forms in the case of parading as a social outward signifier and inward occasion for coming together collectively. The exact parades were different, but many of the same elements, such as trucks carrying icons, song, dance and colourful neon lighting were all present, as is the element of moving through the town for all to see.

The involvement of motion through space, towards a goal or between two or more points, becomes clearer when considering pilgrimages, another cultural practice performed by all the major religious groups in and around Tranquebar, and an activity which also involved both inclusion and exclusion.

### **Pilgrimage**

At the very end of my fieldwork, in late June, early July, I went on a road trip, a mix of pilgrimage and tourist sightseeing with a few close informants, including family members of my landlady, “Akka” (Tamil: “Big sister”, a term of respectful endearment). During this time I visited the town of Velankanni, a centre of Catholic pilgrimage routes that also attracts non-Catholics and even non-Christians for the miracles that allegedly take place there. The site is reputed to be the location of a magical appearance of the Virgin Mary at a well, and to this day visitors arrive to be healed.

The Catholic compound is truly monumental, being composed of several churches and basilicas which are collectively able to house several thousands of attendants, and with large adjacent gardens. Along an axis between two large churches is a broad gravel avenue several hundred meters long, where pilgrims come to move towards the sacred well on hands and

knees, hoping in this way to gain better fortune from “Ammaan” (“The Mother”), i.e. the Virgin Mary. At the far end lies a small chapel where the appearance of the Virgin is re-enacted at certain points of the day, and outside lies the well where it supposedly occurred hundreds of years ago. Today, it is a small stone circle covered by transparent plastic plates, with plastic flowers and an artificial waterspout inside. Next to the sacred spot, one can buy plastic bottles in the shape of the Virgin and child, containing blessed oils.

One church in Velankanni, housing a large selection of gifts from people who reportedly had achieved healing after visiting and praying and arranged like a museum, contained a shopping mall of sorts below, much like an indoor bazaar. Here, the worshipful and those simply out shopping comingled after a long day of visiting the Catholic compound. While walking around the site, I spotted a number of people wearing Hindu forehead-decorations (the “bindi” dot, or the striped “tilaka”). I was also informed that one of my travel companions, a Lutheran, had once taken the pilgrimage here and shuffled along on his knees up the broad avenue, in hopes of being healed of an ailment.

Later that day, on the road back from Velankanni, we also visited a Sufi saintly shrine, or “dargah”, in the town of Nagore, which likewise was a centre of pilgrimages. Surrounding the dargah were several kiosks selling various items, both religious icons and plastic toys, while inside women crowded outside the silvery-looking metal-plated doorway of the tomb to peer in. As a man, I was allowed to enter, though no question of my religious beliefs were asked, so long as I covered my legs with a “dhoti”, or Tamil-style sarong.

Later, back in Tranquebar, I compared the two pilgrimage sites to an earlier visit to Ranganathaswamy Temple in the city of Tiruchirapalli, one of the largest Hindu temples in India. Two of the main factors I noticed was the cross-religious appeal of pilgrimages, as all the holy sites were visited by members of other religions, though I was only told about people explicitly coming for miracle-working in the case of Velankanni (a possible result of bias from my Christian informants). Additionally, there was the overlap between pilgrimage and tourism, which was also reflected in the commercial nature of the three places. In all three holy sites, shops were placed inside the temple/church grounds, and one could not only purchase religious paraphernalia and souvenirs (as in the case of a small Virgin Mary-shaped plastic bottle filled with blessed oils in Velankanni), but also totally unrelated items (cowboy hats with glitter, or plastic spades and buckets for beach trips, for example). This mixing of the sacred and profane felt uncomfortable to me, but seemed largely unproblematic to everyone else.

A difference cultural norm considering the mixing of commercial and religious interests seemed to separate me and my informants, however, this general acceptance of commercial interests in holy sites also seemed to accompany a general acceptance of religious “others”. Hindus came to Catholic holy sites, and vice versa. This does not mean that religious boundaries did not exist, or were not important, but rather that they were constructed in a much more complex and nuanced lattice, as the text will go on to show. With these things in mind, I got to think of Mary Douglas’ (1984, p.2) expression of dirt as “matter out of place”:

*“Matter out of place... implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations, and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.”*

Translated to account for people of differing religions and economic interest: such persons and activities were not considered “out of place” in places of pilgrimage or worship for the most part. However, there were limits: when I entered the tomb of the Sufi saint in Nagore, I was told to cover my legs to show respect, thus removing a potential contaminant, and when I attempted to enter the Holy of Holies of the Ranganathaswamy Temple in Trichy, I was outright rebuffed. A non-Hindu roaming the temple was fine, but the abode of the god itself, which is believed to inhabit a central statue in the centre, was a step too far. So long as I was kept outside, I was considered “in place”, and thus not a pollutant.

The risk of “intellectual” or “belief”-pollution comes more strongly into play when considering an important sector of Tranquebar: its schools, and how they serve as perhaps the most important social niche of Christians there, and in many ways as their window to the Hindu majority. In such cases, certain borders and restrictions have been put in place.

### **Educational Institutions**

While walking through Tranquebar, one would be remiss not to notice the disproportionately large amount of educational institutions in such a relatively small area. This is far from coincidental: the Christian churches have a long history of running schools and other form of education in Southern India. From the earliest times of the Danish-German Halle Mission under Ziegenbalg and Plutschau, as well as under various other Protestant and Catholic missionaries, there has been a focus on using schools as an arena to meet the native population, and a place to introduce Christian values as well as knowledge about the Christian

faith. However, while this has been a staple of South Indian Christianity for over 300 years, the actual success in achieving conversions have been very modest, a trend that seems to continue. Consequently, several Christian school officials have tended to emphasise that the schools are not first and foremost a tool for conversion, but rather for uplifting disadvantaged populations, often expressed with a focus on “improving moral character”, as well as by educating on knowledge that exists outside simply preparing children and youth for taking jobs as adults – knowledge of hygiene, sexual health, and more.

In Tranquebar, while Christians do not hold a monopoly on education, Christian-owned institutions dominate the choices of schools for children, and even some higher education as well. The Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Catholic Church in particular each have schools that cover the trajectory from elementary to higher educations. Most of these lie in the heart of the old town of Tranquebar itself, inside the old town walls, and any passer-by or visitor to the town is likely to stroll past one or more of them on any given day, to hear the playful noises of children’s games, or perhaps spot a student in uniform. I was not always able to get interviews with teachers or tours around the schools, and so to further elucidate on this matter, I am using Schönbeck’s “All Religions Merge in Tranquebar” (2012) for supplementary information, as it contains fairly extensive interviews and looks into the educational landscape there.

In and near the town, there are three elementary schools of Christian denomination, though only two of them are owned by churches (the Catholic church and the TELC, respectively), while the third is owned and operated by a Christian NGO (the Hope Foundation). Additionally, there is a small Muslim school in Mosque Street, and a non-religious charitable school a few kilometres outside the town centre, past the Holy Rosary Church, down the East Coast Road. These latter are, however, so small comparatively, that they will only be mentioned here. Instead, I will compare the three Christian schools mentioned earlier.

St. John’s Primary School is run by the nuns of the St. Theresa’s Convent, a local branch of the Congregation of the Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate (SMMI). I did not visit the interior of the school myself, but according to the account of Schönbeck, the school had 915 students, with one class having about 40 girl students, and a staff of 23 people. Of the students, the vast majority are Hindus – the example class of 40 had only 2 Christian girls in it – while the majority of the teaching staff are Christian, several of whom are themselves nuns. (Schönbeck, 2012, .70-73).

The TELC Plutschau Elementary School is named after one of the two first Lutheran missionaries who arrived in 1706. It was originally located by the seaside of Tranquebar and was the most popular school of attendance for the Fishermen caste members, due to its convenient location near their traditional neighbourhood. The Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004, however, changed this. Many children were killed by the water, and their lifeless bodies were recovered from the school grounds. After this, the number of children attending the school at some point dropped to as low as 7. This reduction in number of students was not just due to safety concerns over the previous events, but reportedly also due to Hindu concerns over spending time in areas where dead bodies have lain, as these areas are ritually impure. It is difficult to say which concern was strongest. The government eventually made the school move inland, at least 200 meters by the sea. By the time Schönbeck visited the school, the school had 229 students, roughly equally divided by gender, and of which about 80% were of the Fishermen caste, according to its principal at the time. Like St. John's, the vast majority of the students are Hindus, from Hindu families (Schönbeck, 2012, p.78-80). The staff denomination was mixed, but from speaking with many TELC members in the Tranquebar area, there emerged a pattern where many of them were teachers, both men and women, with the TELC schools appearing like practical places of employment.

The Hope Foundation Matriculation School is a School run by the Hope Foundation, ostensibly a Christian NGO. The school's director started his activity in the Tranquebar area in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, originally giving out staple foodstuffs like rice and dahl (dried and split legumes, like lentils), and eventually moved to Nagapattinam, a larger city in the same district. According to the director, the school was founded due to the requests and wishes of the local population, the Fishermen caste in particular.

The prospect of English-language education which followed a stricter form of curriculum (hence the term "matriculation", as it refers to a specific kind of curriculum in India) than the schools already present in the area seemed to excite some parents who viewed this as a chance for their children to get improved chances at higher education or careers. Professionals from the other schools, however, in addition to being sceptical of the school's presence in itself as competition, argued that the strain for the children be taught with higher requirements in a language many of them did not speak would be a detriment. The school has since switched to the same curriculum as the surrounding schools, though it retains English as its language. The school remained very popular with the coastal Fishermen caste, although it also had students from the Scheduled Castes and other communities – once again of mostly Hindu

backgrounds. Additionally, the staff was mostly Hindu at this school.

A theme that repeats among the Christian-run schools is that the student body is overwhelmingly Hindu, and that the conversion rate ranges extremely low, to almost non-existent. This seems to clash somewhat with the missionary's idea of schools as an arena where Christianity can be presented for the natives, and where conversions are made. After over 300 years of this practice, Christians still make up only a small percentage of South Indians, and even in a Christian stronghold like Tranquebar, they are still a minority. In St. John's, children were taught to do the sign of the cross, they were read Bible stories, and morning assemblies included the singing of Christian hymns. Inside the classrooms, Christian decoration dotted the area: Jesus, St. John as the namesake of the school, and the Virgin Mary in the guise of "Our Lady of Good Health" – a representation of Mary based on a 16<sup>th</sup> century miraculous appearance in the town of Velankanni, located about an hour south of Tranquebar. Similarly, the TELC Plutschau school also incorporated Christian elements into its morning assemblies and daily activities, including psalms, prayers and ethical lessons based on Christian theology (Schönbeck, 2012, p.76-78, 80-83). Of these three, only the Hope Matriculation school did not show overt Christian identity, a fact that the school administrator made sure to explain to me when I visited. If one views the purpose of Christian-run schools in Tranquebar as places to manufacture converts, then it can certainly be argued that they are failures and a lost venture. However, to take such a simplistic approach would hide other important views on what the purpose of these schools are.

In interviews with school staff, both nuns at St. John's, teachers at Plutschau, and the administrator of Hope Matriculation made it clear that they were well aware of the low conversion rates, and in fact were the ones to provide the statistics. What all of them seemed to argue, however, was that the purpose of the school was perhaps more realistically to teach the children what they termed "good Christian values". These values, for example respect for others, monetary prudence, work ethic and maintaining a good hygienic regimen, were seen as derived from the Christian faith, but would be useful for anyone that could be taught them, irrespective of religion. As such, the schools were more than just "convert factories", and indeed also more than places where future workers were created – rather they were places where through moral lessons and repeated practices, it was believed that children from the often-poor Fishermen and Scheduled Caste families could be given an improvement of overall life quality.

The attitude of Christian missionaries coming to an area "to improve the lives" of the natives

is one that does ring heavily of a colonial past, and even in postcolonial transnational relations attitudes of condescension from First World agents of religious organizations, governments or NGOs are common, as well as in the promotional media produced to make donors support such “educational ventures”.

A purely postcolonial critique of the situation in Tranquebar however, would probably gloss over that these “agents” are themselves local residents, or at least Indian nationals, and many of them are immersed in local social relations, whether through marriage, other family, personal history, or other group identities such as caste membership.

There comes a point where what may once have been started as a colonial, transnational venture, becomes an integrated part of the social landscape, as natural to those living there as what may have existed there before. Christian schools are undoubtedly an ingrained feature of Tranquebar’s social life, as places of education, employment, sources of social events (“functions” in the local vernacular), and as physical landmarks.

In the case of Hope Matriculation school, its creation was even requested by Hindu Fishermen – and talks with TELC and Catholic school employees generally show a mutually cordial relationships with Hindu parents and the Hindu majority as a whole, one where Christian teachings in schools, or mandatory church service/mass participation are accepted as part of the “deal”, even if overt Christian proselytizing is rejected firmly, albeit usually in a non-confrontational manner. For example, a school, supported by a Christian NGO, once sent its students home with copies of the Bible. These were then promptly burnt by many of the parents, without much further discussion (Schönbeck, 2012, 87-91). This was not a grand, public gesture of sectarian violence as the phrase may imply to some, but rather a quiet, practical removal of unwanted religious material, usually done in the privacy of the family home.

There had been an unspoken agreement on where the limit on the school’s influence was supposed to be – and when it was perceived that the schools had violated that limit, the barrier had been swiftly rectified. Through this behaviour we see that while in many cases, especially with the use of symbols and in the movement of individuals, that religiosity can flow fairly freely around in different social settings, there are still borders and separation maintained.



## **Mission activity**

Throughout the course of my research into the activities of the different Christian congregations in Tranquebar, it became clear that while they originated as products of intense missionary activity, and in many ways prided themselves on the history of driven men of God who spread the word of salvation, there was little to no such activity going on in contemporary times. Exemplified strongly through the schools, there was a kind of barrier between socializing with Christians or attending Christian establishments, and actually preaching. Such open proselytizing could be seen as offensive by the Hindu majority, as with the case of the burnt Bibles, and a threat – which in turn can make things harder for the Christians in other regards, most importantly getting pupils to the schools, but also more serious concerns.

Fears of sectarian violence based on rumours from North India circulated during my stay, and these were not without merit, as other sites in Tamil Nadu have spiralled into hostile or violent events. Mosse (2012, p.235) reports increased conflict between the RSS (Hindu nationalists) activists and Catholic Christians in southern Tamil Nadu, which threatened to escalate several times, and turned a previously relatively harmonic religious coexistence into one of mutual hostility. In Tranquebar as well, it was clear that some level of restraint had to be used to not upset an equilibrium between the religious groups, an unspoken understanding that most of the congregations abided by, whether willingly or begrudgingly. Most did this – not all, however.

The Pentecostalist groups, such as the Zion Missionary Hall is known for practicing missioning. They attract many poor casteless as well as Fishermen caste Hindus. The Pentecostalists see this as essential to their work, and argue that the Hindus come of their own free will, for example to be healed or have evil spirits exorcised. Most of these do not convert, instead leaving once their problems are ostensibly over, while others return in secret and become “secret Christians” because they are afraid of being punished by their caste-fellows. This can be seen as a violation of the perceived equilibrium.

Through interviews with a few of the Hindus I knew, they expressed the belief that the Pentecostalists were tricking poor Hindus to attend meeting and later convert in the hopes that they would get a better financial position. My Hindu informants, mostly not of the notably restrictive Fishermen caste, saw this as a matter of economic and class exploitation more than religious disruption, but as later chapters will make clearer, there were certainly social forces

at play that strongly disincentivized Hindus of insular castes from breaking their family and caste ties in order to change religion.

When arriving in Tranquebar, I was told higher-ups in the Christian Churches were sceptical of the Pentecostalists by several Christian informants, based on the perception that they were “stealing” Christians away from other churches more than they were converting Hindus. Later interviews with the TELC priests, the Catholic priest and Ziegenbalg Spiritual Centre director all expressed a more complex attitude. The priests argued that there was no real competition, even if they preferred if their parishioners did not go there, while the Director expressed admiration for the pentecostalist pastors who were out preaching, while the mainline priests were “disappointing” in this respect, having forgotten or ignored their purpose as Christians in India.

## **Summary**

In this chapter we’ve seen how ever-present symbols that flow almost frictionlessly through social space and cause little reaction. We’ve also seen how when examining individual and organized collective religious practices such as ritual celebrations in public space or sociolects, clearer markings of group membership becomes more important. Cross-religious attendance in public events and in public space is more common and more easily acceptable than cross-religious attendance in closed, religion-specific events, for example. However, that these public events often take similar forms regardless of the performing religion creates a sense of shared performative language, which aids in the sense of cross-religious community.

Throughout the chapter, when describing the situation regarding the Christian schools and the relative absence of active missioning in Tranquebar, we have seen what I have argued is a kind of unspoken idea of religious equilibrium. This equilibrium, when broken in the case of Pentecostalist preachers, cause both consternation and admiration depending on different priorities and values in different people, making the issue of missioning a potential locus of friction and conflict.

## Chapter 3: Congregational Life

*Bent Eilif Noddeland*



Figure 4. The Holy Rosary Church

### Introduction

Previous chapters have concerned the interaction of religious practices and symbols in mostly secular, or shared spaces, whether they are streets, homes, or the Christian private schools, which mainly have non-Christian students and a fair share of non-Christian staff. Relatively little has yet been said however, about the internal spaces of Christians themselves, and the interaction between the different Christian denominations. In this chapter I will be looking more specifically into the social life within the Christian congregations in Tranquebar, and compare them in various ways, both in the issues they face, how they are organized.

An outline of the existing Christian congregations within the Tranquebar area has been made previously, but a refresher may be in order. Christian life in Tranquebar is mainly dominated by the Catholic and Tamil Evangelical Lutheran parish churches. They are also joined by the Catholic convent of St. Theresa, which does on certain occasions host open Mass and other events. A congregation belonging to the Church of South India – a Church formed by various Protestant churches, including Methodists, Anglicans and Presbyterians uniting into a “uniting

and united” Church – lies just opposite of the main TELC congregation. Farther off, the Zion Prayer House provides a non-mainline, charismatic alternative to the other Churches, with its mainly Pentecostal-based worship meetings and functions.

There are, in addition, a number of tiny congregations which, while not hugely influential in social life, are worth mentioning to add some nuance to the religious landscape: these include amongst others a non-denominational congregation that is in practice a small orphanage where only the pastor, his wife, and the orphans are members, and a converted farmhouse which also serves as the dwelling for a faith healer and prophetic figure whose practices are best described as syncretic, with influences from Catholicism, Sufism and Hindu asceticism.

Each of the examples mentioned here will receive at least some treatment in this chapter, with an attempt to understand their interconnectedness, differences, and ongoing changes, though my research mainly focused on the larger congregations, for reasons of practicality more than anything else.

### **Service & Mass**

The church service, mass, or meeting is arguably the main religious practice, or ceremony in most Christian denominations. Regardless of the name used, it usually takes the form of a gathering of worshippers in a meeting hall or consecrated church conducted at least on every Sunday morning, wherein there will be songs accompanied by musical performances, Bible readings, and offering of money from attendees to support the Church’s operations or for social outreach. Services may also incorporate the Eucharist, a central ritual of Christianity where Christians ritually ingest the body and blood of Christ as a means of attaining a form of closeness to God, whether metaphorically (as in Protestantism), or literally (as in Catholicism through the doctrine of transubstantiation). The central, or at least most time-consuming part of most church services, however, is the sermon. This usually takes the form of a speech made by the service officiant, whether priest or otherwise, and is meant to educate, inform, and motivate the attendees to help them live according to the tenets of Christianity.

While a description of a church service might seem humdrum or mundane to many readers, it is worth putting up such a common framework to begin with, so as to more clearly outline differences later. The congregations I visited with all included the aforementioned elements, however the ways in which they were performed, and the order of performance and the

emphasis that was put on each, varied. This may be due to official rules which are common in mainline churches, called liturgy, or it may be due to the preferences of the head of the congregations, which is more common in non-mainline churches, such the Pentecostals.

### TELC Services

From the beginning of my fieldwork, just a few days after my arrival, I began attending church services. The majority of these were attended at the New Jerusalem church, of the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church. The second-oldest church in the city, it is a notable landmark with a prominent monogram of the Dano-Norwegian king, Frederick IV, under whose protection the church was built in the early 1700s. The church has a cruciform layout, with pews in three of the arms, and the altar in the last. A small gallery is located at the opposite side of the altar. It was fairly recently renovated inside, with some minor work still being undertaken, and is shining white both inside and outside, with dark, smooth tiles for the floor. The furniture is largely of a dark, polished and lacquered wood. In the ceiling several fans provide some measure of relief from the heat, which became quite sweltering as the months progressed towards summer during my stay. It is, however, a comparatively cool place in the early mornings, with gentle breezes flowing through the church perpendicular to the nave, where the doors in both wings stand open. Apart from regular Sunday services from 08.30 to 11.00, the New Jerusalem church also conducted Friday evening services from 18.30 to 20.00, which I also attended, though not as regularly. Lastly there were a number of times where certain extraordinary services would be called, such as the anniversary of Ziegenbalg's death, or during Lent.

The services in New Jerusalem are conducted entirely in Tamil, as per a church reform in the mid-20th century that nativized the liturgical language. As such, my understanding of the themes and topics of the sermons were quite limited, as my understanding of Tamil sadly never went beyond simple grammar, general concepts, and stock phrases. I did however, on a number of occasions manage to ask the attending priest about the sermons, and sometimes another parishioner. I would also bring my own Norwegian-language Bible to the services to try to follow the sermons that way. It was my impression that in general, the topics and themes of the services varied little from what I was used to from my own upbringing as a member of the Church of Norway, itself also a Lutheran church. Topics typically revolved around the acts of Jesus and the apostles, and how these pertained to the lived lives of Christians today. One significant difference, however, was the level of interactivity present during the sermons. Priests would regularly question the parishioners on the specific verse in

which a phrase was said, and answers would come from the pews. Sometimes the parishioner would be provided with a verse, and then read it aloud for the congregation, and sometimes this would either be repeated or cut off by the priest, who would interject to make a point or to emphasise a specific part of the passage. The ones who answered the call were usually women, although I could never figure out exactly why.

With my language skills being lacklustre at best, often resorted to taking sociometric or descriptive notes on the congregation. By sociometry, I am here referring to simple and approximate quantification of number of attendees, the ratio of adults to children, women to men, the relative placement of different groups I could identify, etc. By descriptive notes I am referring to general notes on the behaviour of attendees, such as head covering, whether special clothing was used, activity of children, use of phones, general movement, talking in the pews and so forth. I would also repeat this process in the other churches, though in some cases my note-taking seemed to bother people around me, so I would attempt to do it afterwards, discretely, or occasionally drop it altogether as it became disruptive. In the New Jerusalem church, where my arrival and project were announced and probably understood the best - or my presence simply the most mundane, my note-taking ceased to be of interest after only a couple of months.

I generally estimated that the church was 2/3rds full in terms of pew spaces, though a number of people also sat on the floor at the front. The majority of these were boys from the nearby TELC Bishop Johnson Memorial Upper Secondary School, making up about half of the attendees altogether. It was well-known by people that most of these boys were not themselves Christians, but Hindus belonging to the local Fishermen caste community, but they attended the services as a part of attending a school run and financed by the TELC.

While it could be tricky to count the number of attendees due to no seating having absolute free view, I usually counted the crowd to be between 120 and 150 attendees, fluctuating from Sunday to Sunday, except in the case of the school boys, whose presence and number was near constant, i.e. somewhere around 60-70. These boys, who attended schools owned by the TELC had a mandatory attendance, despite very few of them being Christians. Of the rest, there was a mixture of married couples, families and lone individuals attending, many of them being middle-aged or older. Sunday services usually saw people, especially women, dressing more formally than they would normally do, though there were occasions, such as baptism or the aforementioned special services, where even more formal clothing would be worn. As

such, the setting of the church service could be described as semi-formal, a situation not too different from my own experiences with ordinary services back home. Many women would cover their hair with the shawl of their saris until leaving the church, though there was no equivalent behaviour among the men that I could see. Everyone removed their footwear before entering the church, and there was usually a slight delay when leaving the church as people moved to find and put on their sandals right outside the church doors.

Children of a young age seemed to mostly behave as they wanted unless they were being held in place by their parents or sitting on their laps. Some children would speak up when the priest spoke, and be shushed, or wander around along the wall, or look at other parishioners with typical childish curiosity. I was, unsurprisingly, an object of their curiosity myself. Young girls often wore dresses and decoration such as Jasmin-flowers woven into their hair or around their arms. The school boys just wore their school uniform consisting of beige short-sleeved shirts and burgundy trousers, and there were few other boys present in the church with which to compare.

Young adults in an age range of roughly 16 to early twenties was conspicuously absent from most services I could see. This was likely due to many of these being away to attend higher education institutions, or possibly also working. There is also possible that some were away to work abroad in other countries or other parts of India, to supplement the income of their families. Lastly, it is possible that many from this age range may simply not be interested in attending services and had successfully resisted requests from the family. In any case, it did create a kind of demographic hole for the New Jerusalem church's services.

### Catholic Mass

The Holy Rosary Church is the main place of meeting for the Catholic congregation, though a number of smaller chapels exist in nearby villages, and more importantly, the Catholic convent also holds Mass with some regularity.

Being cruciform like New Jerusalem, the Holy Rosary is functionally divided into three wings, with the main nave being opposite the altar. Unlike in the TELC, there is a conscious segregation to these wings, with the main nave being reserved for women and children, and the two side-wings being reserved for men and the convent nuns and clergymen, respectively. This separation of genders did not occur in the other congregations I visited but seemed to be unique for the Catholics.

Compared to Lutheran liturgy, Catholic Mass is longer and more physically involved, with much more involvement from the attendees. Standing up, kneeling, sitting down were all motions that occurred very frequently, compared to the TELC or Church of South India, but the preaching lacked the aspect of interactivity present in the TELC.

The convent is located along King Street, giving it a very central location, but the Holy Rosary Church is located some distance outside the town, along the East Coast Highway which also passes through the Tranquebar Market Street. This somewhat peripheral location means that the Catholic congregation has more space to organize exterior events, or to accommodate larger crowds, which it needs as the church itself is not large enough to seat all the regular parishioners. Those who have to stand outside of the church, or sit on the garden walls can listen to the sermons and songs through the exterior speaker system, mounted on a freestanding tower, thus assuring that a lack of interior space is not a hindrance to attendance. At one point, when I decided to sit down outside, finding the interior full, I received many surprised glances and some urged me to come in, even making a man give up his seat for me. I politely declined as best I could, finding the whole affair embarrassing. Such preferential treatment always raised a large number of questions: was it a case of wanting to treat a foreigner and visitor graciously, was it that they saw me as a scholar and therefore worthy of deference, or were there other, more complex concerns involved, involving racial or caste-based biases? This issue will be revisited in later chapters, but it was an ongoing trail of thought during my fieldwork, and I at times desperately longed for the status of “banality” where no one paid me any special attention.

Like the TELC, the Catholic church in Tranquebar manages a number of schools and hostels for children, especially girls, and these too were obligated to attend services, though I was not able to count numbers of them, and it is possible they simply attended specific services or mass in the schools, or even the convent. The convent did hold public mass every now and then, and in those cases used a fairly large internal courtyard inside the convent building complex. These were highly attended, and reinforced the impression that the Catholic Church is numerically the largest Christian denomination in Tranquebar, although many of its adherents are from the surrounding villages. This means that Catholics are proportionately more likely to be of a lower socioeconomic class than the more middle-class dominated TELC. Such evaluations must be taken with a pinch of salt, however, as I was aware of destitute members of the TELC, and also of highly notable and successful Catholics in the area.



During an interview with the Catholic Parish priest, I was told that the church attracts a number of non-Christians, who are primarily interested in spiritual aid or healing, but do not wish to otherwise seek conversion. According to Schönbeck (2012), many of these came to attend Tuesday Mass around a chapel dedicated to St. Anthony. The chapel, while dilapidated, was rumoured to hold great power, and many Hindus from Scheduled Castes – about 80% of the attendees according to the priest – came in search of miracles (p.114-115). Both mine and Schönbeck’s interviews with the priests at different points in time made it clear that the Catholic church locally was open to non-Christian coming and praying by the chapel, and while they were interested in converting them to Christianity, the priest saw spiritual conversion as more important than a formal change of religion.

### Zion Prayer Hall Meeting

During the last month of my fieldwork, I was able to expand my field somewhat, as I visited a Pentecostal congregation a few miles outside of town. This marked my most significant interaction with what was known as “non-mainline Christianity”, i.e. the congregations that existed outside the larger, organized churches. In this case, the congregation, while not explicitly advertising any specific identity, self-identified according to its founder and one of the two current pastors, both of whom I interviewed separately, as charismatic and Pentecostal. What this means in practice, is a focus on the spiritual gifts (charisma) which are believed to have been granted by the Holy Spirit after the events of Pentecost, after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Commonly, charismatic churches focus on developing an ongoing relationship with the Holy Spirit, and discover one’s own spiritual gifts, as well as displaying and using these gifts, such as healing, demon exorcism, speaking in tongues, and so forth.

According to the current pastor I interviewed, the congregation was founded in the ‘80s when the founder, a man known as Peter Sami, locally renowned for his abilities of healing and exorcism, abandoned his legal practice and began a life of preaching. He arrived in the area of Tranquebar and started small, with only a handful of attendees in a small, single-room space. However, since then, the congregation has grown to have an impressive hall of worship, with room for around a hundred people, though there are no pews or benches as people sit on the floor. The building, in bright white much like New Jerusalem and the CSI Zion Church, differs in an important aspect as it has no bell tower or spire. It is a rectangular building, with one large room with some columns. At the front is a stage, where the preacher and other people preach, sing, or otherwise perform before the congregation. The preachers do not wear

any specific clothing as sign of their office, instead wearing shirts and trousers similar to what most middle-class men wear daily.

The style of preaching is significantly more intense than that of mainline priests, whether TELC, CSI or Catholic, with repetition, varied speed and tone, and sudden exclamations being used throughout the sermon. Additionally, the service is longer and less rigidly structured than that of the mainline churches, and though I was not able to go through the services in detail, it seemed to have room for improvisation, significant audience interaction, and spontaneity. In all of these aspects, the congregation fits into my personal experience with Pentecostal meetings in my native Norway. It is a style of worship that emphasizes the presence and activity of the holy spirit, wherever it may lead, as opposed to any established liturgy. That being said, a general program with a defined start and finish did exist.

This congregation was only one of several in the area, which had been explained to me as having grown significantly in the last twenty or so years. There was some disagreement on whether the Pentecostal congregations actually converted Hindus to Christianity, or whether they merely “displaced” people who were already Christian from one church to another. The pastors of the congregation themselves vehemently denied any mention of them taking people away from other churches, saying that if people were switching churches, that was their own business. One informant with the TELC however, argued that the Pentecostalist pastors more freely promised prosperity, health and healing than what mainline churches could promise, and that they therefore managed to attract people desiring improvement in their mortal lives. Interestingly, there were also informants, both with the TELC and CSI, that argued that ultimately it was not so important where Christians went to worship, as long as they “remained with Christ”. One informant even went so far as to lambast what he saw as cowardice or laziness among the mainline priests for not proselytizing more. The informant wrote down the number of Christians at the time of Ziegenbalg's death, less than a hundred, and then the number of member of the TELC today, around a hundred and fifty thousand, and said that Ziegenbalg would have been disappointed with them, saying that Peter Sami had done great work in preaching and converting. As yet another contrast, the Pentecostal pastor I interviewed, expressed some resignation over the sincerity of these conversions. People would come, he said, to have their evil spirits exorcised, or their diseases healed, and then go off again, only to return when new problems arose. “But we welcome them back,” he said, expressing that this continuous support of people, even if they were not sincere in their

beliefs, (or “disciplined” as they sometimes put it), was ultimately a sign of benevolence on the part of the pastor and congregation.

The issue of the relation between the mainline and non-mainline churches was not one of simple competition, as shown. I suspect, though cannot outright verify, that there was a local-central split in the mainline churches' attitude to the Pentecostal preachers, with central actors (either from the central offices in larger cities or personified in the priests who only serve a few years in each parish) being more likely to be critical of them, whereas long-time local residents would be more likely to see them in a sympathetic light, as they had had decades of interaction with each other. Another possibility is that central actors might emphasize denominational doctrine higher (the issue of whether one can promise healing, etc.), whereas local actors might emphasize the perceived work being done (ie. number of converts, the construction of new worship halls, etc.).

#### Other Congregations of Interest

The four largest congregations in Tranquebar were the ones belonging to the large mainline Churches of the TELC, Catholic Church (including the St. Theresa's convent) and the CSI. Additionally, the Zion congregation, which had grown radically over the last twenty or so years, formed a fourth large congregation in the area. This does not mean, however, that these four were the only Christian communities of interest. Over the course of speaking with many informants I was told of a number of congregations and smaller – or less formal – communities which skirted the orthodox and mainline. Below, I have outlined a couple of these, to provide examples of the kind of plurality of religious expression exists in Tranquebar alongside the conventional.

I first got to know about the Holy Praise Charitable Trust on a whim by a Hindu passer-by when he asked me what I was studying in Tranquebar. He pointed me towards Post Office Street, running just along the coastal flood barriers, and next to a dilapidated and disused Hindu shrine, where I would find an orphanage. This surprised me: I had walked past this place many times, and even enjoyed my lunch of bananas and breaded eggs on the barrier rocks laid out just in front of it, but never had I expected it to be the site of an orphanage. I was at the point aware that several institutions in Tranquebar, including the TELC and the St. Theresa's convent, as well as some secular institutions, cared for children informally called “orphans”. In reality, a fair share of these did have parents, however they were often too poor, sickly, or possibly absent to be able to take care of their children, and so were taken in by

hostels or charitable trusts. In some cases this also applied to “semi-orphans”, a term with a fairly loose meaning, extending to both children with only one living parent, one present parent, and so on. I had, however, not expected such institutions to “hide” in among residential houses.

The orphanage, officially known as “Children’s Home Esther Ammal Anbuillam” was small, non-denominational and headed by a Pastor and his wife. It housed not only orphans, but in reality, also the pastor and his family, with the total of children of about 7-8. During a lengthy interview with the pastor, I was informed that he commuted to Chennai, where he was involved in congregational work as a musician singing and performing Christian music for schools, orphanages, churches and so forth. Over a couple of cups of tea and some biscuits, he explained that he had been diagnosed with a deadly illness, and vowed that if he got another chance, he would dedicate his life to the Lord. It turned out that he had miraculously gotten better, and ever since then he had been working to create and expand this orphanage, in order to help children and serve God. While we spoke, several of the orphanage’s children shyly peered into the office, situated next to the entry hallway as it was, and he invited them in to greet me.

The Holy Praise’s Children’s Home (as some other informants abbreviated it to) was somewhat disconnected from the congregational and ecumenical life in Tranquebar, with the pastor seeing himself not as Tranquebarian, but an outsider mainly working in Chennai, and only having moved here fairly recently. When I asked him about what he thought about denominational rivalries over which congregations or denominations were the largest, or whether the mainline churches disliked its members visiting Pentecostal meetings, he gestured with his hands and made it clear that “I am well with everyone. I have no quarrel with anyone – take no sides, just do the work for the Lord Jesus Christ. It is enough.”

The Holy Charitable Trust represents a case of very small, entrepreneurial congregations. While not large or influential in any sense, it is an example of a phenomenon of many burgeoning “one-man” churches that seemed spawned from a strong personal conviction after a personal disaster. It mirrors the story of Peter Sami, the founder of the Zion congregation, abandoning his life as a promising lawyer and spending the next several decades preaching and doing missionary work. According to my “big sister” Akka, she recalled her mother providing catering to Peter Sami and his small congregation, which at that time had used a tiny house somewhere nearby Goldsmith Street – a place now largely ruined after the 2004 tsunami.

One example of cross-religious appeal from spiritual powers was “Samy”, sometimes known as a fortune-teller. While he lived in the vicinity of the nearby town of Porayar, in what appeared to be a farmhouse, Samy attracted many adherents who came to find healing or to have their future revealed. Samy’s “congregation”, if such a term can be used, came from Christian, Muslim and Hindu people, and had a strongly syncretistic feel and appearance. Samy himself had allegedly been a Catholic until he took up the practice of healing and fortune-telling, but his name was in fact a variant of “swami”, a title for a religious teacher in Hinduism. During the time Schönbeck (2012) visited him, the barn was not only filled with animals and decorated with Christian iconography and lit candles, there were also lines of people wishing to see the guru. However, some Christians, like Schönbeck’s translators, refused to enter the building, seeing Swamy as a “sorcerer” (Schönbeck, 2012, p.127-129).

Swamy serves as an example of how even the best attempts to properly delineate between different religions inevitably brings up problems – not only do religious congregations or communities mix beliefs and practices, but individual believers may switch between congregations, or be present in multiple on alternating occasions. While many Christians would surely prefer Christians to strictly stick to orthodox, mainline Christian practices, the fact is that Christians navigated a field in which different forms of Christianity – whether mainstream or heterodox – were realistic alternatives for some.

Lastly, there exist a few Christian churches and chapels of varying denominations (both mainline and free churches, i.e. TELC, Catholic and Pentecostal), and several Hindu temples in Porayar and its vicinity (Schönbeck, 2012, p.127). Porayar, as the nearest larger town, attracts visitors and students from Tranquebar, and so there is a good deal of overlap between the two communities, to the point where the Tharangambadi Taluk Office (the municipal government), is located just out of Porayar, not in Tranquebar proper. People may belong to congregations outside their town, and therefore commute for Sunday services, or visit for particularly significant events. Additionally, people may move due to work or life conditions (marriage, etc.), and join a new, local congregation, or choose to stick with their old one. Some people may also conduct pilgrimages, which may take them quite far away. It is therefore important to note that while my research is rooted in the territorial and socio-spatial area of Tranquebar, people do move fairly frequently and freely in and out of the area.

This means that not only were the Christian congregations IN Tranquebar subject to switching and mutual “osmosis”, but the movement of people across geographical borders or distances also produced possibilities for change and shift.



*Figure 5. The New Jerusalem Church*

### **Internal differences – TELC administrative & legal dispute**

To paint a picture of the churches and denominations as internally homogenous or free of friction and conflict would be strongly misleading. As shown thus far, Tranquebar's Christians are not wholly beholden to simply being grouped together into a monolithic block, but carry with them many different interests and values that can clash, both on a collective and individual level. These may be sectarian, caste-based, or they may be based on differing priorities within the same organization, such as an incorporated community like a church. In

some cases, members or families may change their denomination through formal means, or as a consequence of moving to a new locale, or even simply subtly change their focus by attending multiple congregations at once, including non-mainline or heterodox communities, but those who stay put in their own Church also have means with which to express disagreement. The one example I had any particular knowledge of concerns a long-running disagreement in the TELC which will be detailed below, however this should not be taken to imply that the other churches did not have similar, or different, internal issues.

From the very beginning of my fieldwork until the end, the management of the TELC remained an issue several informants were preoccupied with. During my time I saw several different viewpoints, and several different explanations as to what exactly had gone wrong, what was wrong, and who exactly were the active parts in whatever was wrong. It has therefore been difficult to understand the matter, and what is presented below is the situation to the best of my understanding. Any errors are my own, for which I apologize.

Crucial to the matter was the perception of corruption, incompetence, and/or mismanagement in the TELC administration. The TELC does not simply hold church services, but like many other churches, run schools, at least one hospital, a printing press, own large amounts of property, and employ many people.

As I arrived, I was met with the information that the teachers at the TELC boys' school had not been paid in months by the management. This prompted me to ask more about the situation, where I was informed that there was currently a kind of constitutional crisis going on in the TELC as it had no bishop (the spiritual head of the church), and that the secretary of the board had taken on the responsibilities of both bishop and secretary, effectively marginalizing the rest of the board. Apparently two different candidates had been put forth by two different factions in the church, but for whatever reason, there was a deadlock and no bishop had been elected. This, I would later come to learn through acquiring a copy of the TELC's bylaws, was a breach of rules, which strained the church's relations with the state, as it cause a long-running court case against the church's management.

As a consequence of the church's inability to follow its own bylaws, and the subsequent litigation against them, the state seemed unwilling to accept the wage-payment requests for teaching staff from the church for its schools. This further exacerbated the already slow process of wage-verification which had become centralized under the secretary and de facto

head of the church, who was widely disliked by most of the people I spoke with, both clergy and ordinary parishioners.

There were dissenting voices, however. An older informant, a family member of my landlords, expressed dissatisfaction with the former bishop as well, having little faith in anyone the church might elect as the leader, seeing the fault as more systemic than the product of a character flaw. This should, I believe, be seen in the context of a widespread public distrust of officials and functionaries in both state and private sector, and accusations of corruption being common, and not unfounded. During my stay, a large scandal occurred at the very top of Tamil Nadu political leadership, as V.K. Sasikala, the highly controversial party leader for AIADMK in the wake of the death of the popular chief minister Jayaram Jayalalithaa, was arrested for misappropriating public funds for the wedding of a family relative. During a conversation with a local driver in Tranquebar, the driver expressed a desire to “get someone like Hitler”. By this he expressed not a desire for Nazism or dictatorship, but rather invoked what is commonly understood to be a strict and authoritarian leader who despite their flaws, managed to get things done.

A foreign worker collaborating with the TELC with restoration work, praised the secretary for their ability to reign in blatant inefficiency in the TELC, beginning to, in a sense, shore up the leaks of revenue caused by corruption at various levels. A common practice had been to rent out facilities at extremely low prices, officially. In reality, the rent had been higher, but part of it had gone under the table to the church official responsible for renting out. As these activities were centralized along with wage-verification, it became harder to hide corruption, and revenue to the church itself rose.

The teachers resumed receiving payments in May, and as I left Tranquebar in July, I was informed that the court case was going towards the end, and the election of a new Bishop was in sight.

## **Summary**

This chapter has primarily served to show the breadth of Christian practices in Tranquebar, with an emphasis on activity within the context of congregations, and then especially centred on the mass or service itself.

The different congregations organize their respective meetings differently, both in terms of liturgy (or lack thereof), spatial placement depending on the identities of parishioners, as well



as how they connect to non-Christians who are obligated to attend or attend for reasons beyond personal conviction or nominal Christian identity. These can be schoolchildren attending a Christian school, or they can be low caste Hindus seeking aid for troubles in their lives from Christian preachers who are recognized as having spiritual powers by both Hindus and Christians.

We've also seen the presence of non-conventional Christian congregations, some of which are very small, while others display strong signs of syncretism, and show how Christians and non-Christians may not only cross over between participating in different religious spaces and activities, but can also coexist in mixed spaces.

Lastly, we have seen that not only do Christians vary between the different denominations with regards to goals and networks, but internal rivalries and conflicts within the Churches, here exemplified through the TELC legal troubles, shape outwards functionality too, as with TELC's teachers in schools.

## **Chapter 4: Group Identities Beyond Denomination (Caste & Class, Gender & Family Relations)**

### **Introduction**

So far in the text, I have mainly discussed social interactions in Tranquebar in terms of religious interaction and differences. Naturally, this is only one of several aspects of how people there, or anywhere else for that matter, organize themselves, view themselves, and relate to others. Religious affiliation, while important, was by no means always the most relevant or important distinction between people in everyday interaction.

Upon arriving in Tranquebar and meeting with the Christians there, one of my first endeavours was to find ways in which individuals were categorized, how groups were divided, and how these divisions or classifications were carried out in practice, both in everyday life and in ritual spaces. While the religious differences that Christians as a group found themselves in was my main focus, I wanted to move beyond simply religious differences and look at other social categories and identities, in order to create a more holistic and intersectional understanding of my informants.

In this chapter I will mainly focus on what I have divided into two groups: caste & class; and gender & family relations. This categorization is mostly for convenience, as the material discussed in each segment tend to shift between the associated topic.

### **Caste & Class**

Caste is considered one of the most central concepts of South-Asian or Indian ethnography, and it seems almost impossible to do any kind of ethnographic fieldwork in the area without including an analysis or at the very least a short look into the idea and practice of caste.

The term and practice has a very long history, and has been analysed many different ways, from attempts at finding holistic views of caste as a total social phenomenon (Dumont, 1970), or comparing it to social differentiation in other societies, such as race in the United States of America (Berreman, 1960). In order to stay as close to the situation of Tranquebar as possible, I therefore will mainly make use of the analysis laid out by Anne Waldrop (2004), as I believe

this to be the most immediately useful. She identifies different ways to view caste, and in this text I will make use of the way she delineates what can be called the Varna perspective, the Jati perspective and the Substantialist perspective, as these help to elucidate Tranquebar's caste-interaction the most succinctly. A fourth perspective, the Subaltern perspective, which analyses the caste hierarchy from the bottom-up and seeks to show a different, more low-caste centred worldview and understanding of caste as a phenomenon is also hugely important in analysis of caste in general, however it was not something I gathered enough data to include here.

The classical understanding of caste as an all-encompassing system based in Hinduistic (or, more widely, Dharmic) religion, and a main component of most South-Asian societies and cultures is usually seen in the "Varna" concept. The Varna system divides the entirety of society into four major castes, and an external, casteless, or outcaste group. The four castes are the classical "Brahmin" ("priests"), "Kshatriya" ("warriors"), "Vaishya" ("traders") and "Shudra" ("servants"). Those who fall outside of this system are referred to as "Avarna", which can be translated as "without caste", ie. casteless, or more descriptively "outcaste". Within the Varna system, castes are seen as ascending towards a greater spiritual purity, with the Brahmins on the top, and the Shudras at the bottom, and the Avarna below even that, being ritually and spiritually impure by definition (Waldrop, 2004, p.279)

The Varna model of the caste system, while highly widespread in popular culture and widely taught in schools the world over, glosses over a great deal of internal differences, and instead serves to homogenise widely different groups in order for them to neatly fit into easily conceptualized categories. Moreover, it has been argued that as a model, it merely reproduces Brahminic, or high caste (which may include Kshatriya and Vaishya depending on the usage) perspectives and prejudices. Another criticism is that as a system with widespread, near-universal usage, it was only really created during the British colonial period, used as a tool by the colonial governments to ally with local rulers and to implement a kind of census-logic onto vast swathes of newly subjugated groups defined by staggering diversity (Waldrop, 2004, p.280-281, 283).

In contrast, the Jati perspective focus not on societal grand-scale, spiritual perspectives, but on local economic models. A Jati is a localized caste group, defined by a traditionally stereotyped profession, and reciprocating economic relations with other Jatis that perform different services or produce other goods. The particular profession may impose certain

traditional restrictions or benefits. For example, a Jati that deals in dead animals, such as leatherworkers, may be considered impure, while a landholder Jati may be entitled to annual labour services from tenants, while a Jati that performs a service for the landholders can be entitled to a grain allowance from the landholders. These Jatis are, when compared to the Varna caste system, often put into the different Varna categories based on their traditional occupation. However, there does not need to be an entirely 1:1 relationship between these. Lewis (1965) identified different landholder Jatis that were considered Brahmins and Kshatriyas respectively (p.68).

Some translations of jati has used “kind” or “type” to highlight the etymological origins of the term, and how it imposes caste-based endogamy. In Tranquebar, the English word used for a jati was “community”, and it is in this sense the term “Fishermen community”, which I have used throughout the text, is to be understood. The Fishermen community, or “Pattinavar jati” in Tamil, is the largest jati locally, and the jati that stands the most out from the others, as they were not only strictly endogamous compared to other castes, but lived in their own section of the town, and maintained their own temples and caste-council which solved internal issues, usually with fines, which, to the best of my knowledge, most other jatis in the area did not have the organization capacity to carry out. They are defined by their traditional occupation, which is ocean-fishing, though in recent years as the income from fishing had gone down, many had moved on to other professions, while others operated services that were associated with fishing, such as boat engine repair workshops, fishing supply stores and so on.

I very rarely heard people speak in Varna-related terms, albeit with a few exceptions. The most common of these was whenever Brahmins came up during conversations. The number of Brahmins appear to have been so low that while most other grand-scale Varna castes were rarely seen as structurally relevant and people almost always referred to the localized jati instead, Brahmins were often explicitly identified by the Varna term (ie. Brahmin). I did, however get some information that there were relevant sub-groups of these as well, such as during this conversation with a teacher at a local private school:

*“The Brahmins, they have different castes too, Ben.”*

*“Oh? I never knew... how does that work?”*

*“You should ask the principal at [the school I work at], he is a Brahmin. He knows this very well. But there are three castes of them. There is a very high caste, they never*

*eat meat, not even fish, and then there is one in the middle, who they can visit and eat meals with – but then there is a lower Brahmin caste, and the highest caste won't even go in their door.”*

*“Oh, wow, that sounds very strict, and they are all Brahmins, even!”*

*“Yes yes, they are. I will ask the principal, he knows this very well, he will make a chart for you.”*

*“I would be very thankful, please.”*

I never got such a chart, but the explanation of the three sub-castes (or jatis) of Brahmins indicate that people were aware of such under-categories even for Varna-categories with fairly small numbers in any area, and that such differences did in fact matter quite significantly.

Another context in which the Varna category was made relevant was when discussing the entry schemas for higher education. As many of my informants were middle class, and many worked within education, this was a topic they knew well. The government uses the term “Backwards Classes” and “Scheduled Castes & Tribes” to refer to what many in a colloquial sense would refer to as “outcaste”, or as the more politically active might refer to as “Dalits” (“the downtrodden”). In an effort to reduce the stark inequality and to further curb the caste system’s discriminatory effects, government higher education gave students from Scheduled and Backwards-defined groups a lower bar of entry in terms of some of my informants were quite sympathetic

Contrary to the Varna system, there is no inherent concept of “outcastes” in the jati system, as everyone, including those who would be considered casteless in the Varna system are seen as being born into a jati. This does not mean that the system does not contain systemic discrimination, but rather that it is not conceived of as being a linear hierarchy of purity where significant portions of the populations are outsiders. Not everyone has a Varna, but everyone has a jati.

With the jati view of caste taken further, one arrives at not only jatis as a system of economically interdependent endogamous groups, but groups that are perceived as being substantially different from each other, and with a shared substance internally in each jati, or caste community. This view, based on emic Indian understandings, Waldrop labels

“substantialism” (2004, p.280). Jatis are different not simply due to some abstract overarching religious purity measurement or divine order, or due to economic relations and traditional occupation, rather the jatis are different in a very tangible, physical way: they have different substances and are derived from different matter. This explains the strong pressure for endogamy, as only two members with similar substance can safely produce offspring, for example.

Daniel (1984), takes the substantialist analysis a step further, and shows in his analysis of Tamil cosmology, that the jati idea does not simply involve different communities of human beings, but rather encompasses all living things. Different animal species can be seen as jatis, as can plant species, and by extension – different groups of human beings. Keeping the substances separate is preserving the cosmic order, while mixing them up is tantamount to disturbing both a cosmic and social balance. Such mixing not only involves cross-jati (ie. intercaste) marriage, but also “polluting” activities such as sharing meals, sleeping spots, or even entering the residence or neighbourhood of another jati (2004, p.2-4).

Waldrop’s analysis echoes Mosse’s (2012) historical analysis of caste by arguing that a jati perspective, and the following substantialism, removes caste from the purely religious sphere, and resituates it not simply as a Hindu social institution, but as a Indian or South-Asian social phenomenon. Mosse’s historical analysis focuses on the debate both among historical missionaries, such as the early Portuguese Jesuit de Nobili, and later academics, on whether caste is really a religious phenomenon or not. In the case of missionary activity, this question is crucial, as it decides whether Christian communities can abide caste-divisions in their congregations or not. De Nobili thought that, yes, it was merely a cultural phenomenon, but many other missionaries have since seen it more and more as being a religious Hindu phenomenon (Mosse, 2012, p.5-9).

With the above in mind, it becomes easier to understand the strong aversion to cross-caste proximity, or why certain caste groups so strongly resist their members converting to a different religion and marry into different families. Once again, my informants brought up the Fishermen caste (jati) as being the most resistant to missionary efforts, and in some cases outright punishing its own members for attending Christian meetings. I was on multiple occasions told about “secret Christian Fishermen”, though I was never able to meet with any or have any specific numbers verified.

Caste discrimination enters into a complex lattice with religion and class, and one particular

case involved a married couple that I frequented and who helped me as translators on several occasions, where a lower-caste husband had converted to Christianity in order to marry a Christian woman from a higher caste community. Her family disapproved so strongly of this pairing, that for over twenty years they ostracized her from her own extended family, save for her own mother and one of her sister. Such family conflicts are not unheard of, and fit into a larger pattern where families can face severe backlash from their wider kinship group and caste if a member of their family is seen as breaking with the caste purity.

McCulloch (1996), shows multiple examples from the 19<sup>th</sup> century of the precarious situation women were brought into when their husbands converted to Christianity. They were essentially given the choice of severing their ties to their convert-husband as if though he had died (and thus living like a widow), or to sever their ties to their caste-community and extended family, an almost impossible choice for many. She goes on to align this as one of the main reasons why religious conversion in much of Indian history has not been individual, but rather caste-wide, as this prevents such internal cleavages from occurring (McCulloch, 1996, p.154, 169-176)

When I asked my informant, the higher-caste woman with the convert husband, about how she managed to persist being cut off from her family, she proudly displayed a picture of her now-passed away older brother. It was he who had been the family head at the time of her marriage, cut off ties, and who had after many years reconciled with her, finally, shortly before his passing. When asking about whether she felt resentment towards family members over the treatment she had been given, the woman insisted that she did not, and instead chose to focus on things as they were present:

*“Now my family is together, and I am happy.”*

Given the above circumstances, managing to become re-recognized by her family must have been a significant feat of strength of will, requiring to manage her own household financially independently of her extended family, without the ability to ask for help. I was an achievement that she now took not only great pride in, but also, perhaps more importantly, gave her significant peace of mind as she saw her adolescent children becoming a natural part of the extended family, and being able to care more for her own mother in her own household.

Caste thus conceived, with the ideas of differing substance or differences in purity involve a great deal of anxiety over mixing. This is the case whether it is through marriages, shared

meals, or, as we shall see next, shared seating arrangement in churches.

### On Caste in the Church Space

During the many services I attended in the New Jerusalem Church of the TELC, I did not find an obvious seating arrangement aside from the school boys who sat on the floor in the middle of the church. I did however, eventually come across an unspoken rule of seating, almost completely by accident. After having attended several morning services sitting in the same spot, I eventually decided to sit down in a different area, and this would cause a number of reactions.

I would usually sit at the wing closest to the entrance towards the street, mostly out of convenience as well as the spot providing unhindered view of the elevated pulpit. However, on that particular day I wished to have a different view, and I crossed the central space to sit on the opposite side. I sat down on a free spot next to a man, careful not to sit down in a pew where only women already sat. This, I hoped, would be considered proper behaviour. I did, however, receive a number of stares and odd looks. At first I put it down to people simply wondering why I would change seating spot, but as I began observing the people around me, a different idea emerged. Several women were sitting on the floor at the back, even though there clearly were free spots, though only towards the front of the pews.

After the service, I went back to the house where I was a tenant, and spoke to my Akka (“Big sister”, the lady of the house) and Mr. Ebenezer (her husband). What followed was something I often did after I had experienced something that puzzled me: I would recount certain events as truthfully and complete as I could, and then ask why certain things happened.

While one cannot completely rely on the explanation of one person, of course, I came to rely on the interpretations of my landlords/host-family, as it generally seemed to agree with further observations, and explanations by other informants (and when it didn’t, this was usually cause for further investigation). Additionally, and perhaps equally importantly, they did not seem afraid of simply saying that they did not know why certain things had happened, which could be frustrating at times, but which is in hindsight something I am happy for.

As I spoke with them that particular time, I recounted the events of the service, and asked if this had something to do with caste. The answer I received was that yes, that particular area was generally the place where outcaste individuals would sit, and by sitting down there too, I had probably surprised people.



I do not believe that simply being outcaste individuals was enough to explain their peripheral spatial position within the church, as the Christian congregations are known to have a large percentage of outcaste members, however I was unable to find out whether they were members of specific outcaste communities, or whether it was a case of poverty and castelessness intersecting.

This event prompted me to pay closer attention to the continued influence of caste-identity in a Christian context and to more methodically inquire about it when speaking with informants, as opposed to seeing it simply as a question of general attitudes on a per-denominational basis, as had been my approach until then. Additionally, it also provided a good example of the value of accidentally breaking norms as a form of research in itself, though I naturally remained somewhat reluctant to do so willingly, as it is difficult to predict the severity of the breach.

The issue of how to treat caste in a congregational space is something that has posed a problem for Christian churches in India for centuries. The first recorded disputes over this come from the Catholic Jesuit missionaries, such as Roberto de Nobili, as previously explained in the chapter. To these missionaries, caste could be disentangled from Indian religious values, and could be defined as merely a “secular” social mechanic or institution akin to European medieval class or estate hierarchies. Consequently, catering to the concern of inter-caste pollution was seen as legitimate, and this prompted many “creative” solutions, for example providing different missionaries to the high-caste and low-, or outcaste groups respectively, building separate churches, making separate arrangements for the eucharist, or create separate church entrances with a separating middle wall (Mosse 2012, p.44-45) While these practices are no longer supported, and caste is increasingly seen and defined as religious rather than secular, it’s also an undeniable reality on the ground that caste-separation norms are so strong that not even hundreds of years of Christian preaching has been able to eradicate them, whether in Catholic or, as evidenced above, Protestant Lutheran congregations.

I was interested in finding out how TELC clerics viewed the matter, and one evening I was fortunate enough to be able to conduct an interview with a former Bishop of Tranquebar, the titular head of the Tamil Evangelical Church. We, along with his wife, sat down in the cool evening breeze next to the parade grounds in front of the Danish Fort.

*Me: “In the church, how is it with caste? Do people in the TELC think about caste?”*

*Former Bishop: “Oh no, in the church everyone is the same, because of Jesus. He made us all the same, under God.”*

*Me: “Can caste be difficult in other ways? I have seen some examples that people keep distance due to caste.”*

*Bishop: “Well, the people, they... it is difficult, because many follow their caste strictly. They follow their own group – but we never say this to them. Always we preach the word of God, to treat each other as brothers and sisters. Outside the church, we can’t force on them anything.”*

*Bishop’s wife: “And in church too... people will... [pause]”*

*Bishop: “Yes, yes... people, they will decide to sit like this or like that, and keep distance, it is hard to make people not do it like this. My wife, she was teacher here in Tranquebar for many years, she knows very well.”*

*[Bishop’s wife nods her head affirmingly.]*

*Me: “So the TELC is opposed to caste differences?”*

*Bishop: “The church is against such things, yes, but how to make people act on it? This is difficult.”*

*Bishop’s wife: “Caste is... everyone has caste. It can be helpful, and many are afraid to lose it, family... you see. But in Jesus we do not like such things, everyone is together.”*

This interview highlighted that caste-based restrictions and spatial arrangements in the church were less condoned and more tacitly accepted, albeit grudgingly. It also highlighted the reality of the continued survival of caste differences inside the sacred space of the church, and during religious rituals such as the Eucharist, where the outcaste individuals always would go last. This was not something that even former religious personnel were willing to openly admit from the get-go, but required some prodding, as it was possibly something to be embarrassed or ashamed over. The reality and the ideal were at odds, and attempting to push the Christian ideal of equality before God could likely push parishioners away, possibly sending them to other, more accepting Churches.



*Figure 6. Residential street.*

## **Gender & Family Relations**

While staying in the field, I was fortunate enough to be able to stay with a “host-family”, the Ebenezers, and through them I gained valuable insight into the daily life of an ordinary, middle-class Christian family. Moreover, I was often surrounded by the household’s women during the day if I chose to stay at home, and so often spoke with Mrs. Ebenezer about many different topics. On several occasions, our conversations involved the role of women in Tranquebar, partly because she was aware that things were different in Denmark, the US, and other countries. By comparing and contrasting the conversations I had with her and many of her lady visitors, as well as other women that I sometimes were able to converse with, such as the Headmaster of the TELC Teacher Training University, an understanding of how women generally viewed their situation gradually developed.

By contrast, men were less interested in talking about the subject, and so I had to rely on indirectly gaining insight through observing the economic situation, employment, home life, and their choices of conversational topics.

### Gendered Privacy Spheres of the Home

As I stayed with the Ebenezers, I observed some daily practices that assigned roles or even spaces to the different members of the household, roles that could also be observed in other households when I went around on visitations or simply walked by homes. Among these

spatially rooted roles were some that could be placed onto a map of the house itself, as they pertained to ideas of the private and public and the permeability of the household with regards not only to outsiders, but to different members of the household itself. Put simply, certain people, depending on various factors, gender in particular, tended to stick to certain parts of the house when at home. The following few paragraphs will attempt to give an informal explanation of the trends I observed, and which I ended up becoming somewhat enmeshed in and to a degree internalized in my own behaviour.

The basic floor plan of the Ebenezer house was a tripartite division following a front-to-back succession of rooms, all of which were open to each other via a continuous series of doorways linear to each other. This unobstructed linearity was most likely to let the air pass through freely, as Tamil architecture has a number of adaptations for the hot South-Indian climate, including open spaces where the roof meets the wall to allow for circulation under the ceiling, and triple layers of tiles to prevent heat radiating through. The architecture of Tamil houses and its styles will become relevant later on as well.

The first room towards the street can be labelled the living room. It was furnished with a central table, a wicker-woven sofa, several chairs varying from simple plastic or wooden chairs to more elaborate and comfortable wicker-woven ones, a TV and radio. It usually served as the main arena for socializing in the mornings and evenings. As I stayed there for a long while, I also noticed that several members of the family would have their favourite spots to sit, with elderly family members, or visitors usually being prioritized for the more comfortable spots. It also contained a double set of fans, one on the ceiling and one on a floor stand, which were very welcome during the increasing heat of late spring and summer. This was also the room where visitors would be received and entertained if they stayed. Depending on the nature of the visitors, they would either remain outside the door waiting for a member of the family to come out and talk with them, or they would come in and wait in the living room, or even be seated. This was usually as far in as adult men would go, and if only the wife of the family was home at the moment, men would usually remain in the doorway, stay on the porch, or seat themselves in a respectful distance from the inner, more private areas of the house.

There is of course a large variance with regards to familiarity between the visitors and the hosts here. Family members were not usually subject to the same restraints, and the same could be said to some degree for neighbours or well-known workers, handymen or servants.

That being said, adult men usually kept some distance and would fold their hands over their waist or stick to other forms of body language that seemed respectful, such as lowering the hem of their lungi (a kind of men's skirt or kilt used as informal clothing, and usually hitched up so that its hem is above the knees to facilitate easier movement). Over the time I stayed in the Ebenezer house, I realized that I too had subconsciously taken to some of the same practices, as I several times found myself standing outside the doorway to a house, waiting for the husband to come out after I'd greeted the wife, while folding my hands over my front, or even pulling at the legs of my short to try and cover my knees in the presence of women, while I was sitting.

Following the living room, there was the kitchen. I was informed by the Ebenezers that this kitchen, with its wall-hugging counters and closets were apparently a more recent phenomenon, modelled after western kitchens, whereas previously cooking would have occurred in a more secluded area towards the back of the house, and on fire places or surfaces lower towards the ground. While I was in Tranquebar, I generally observed two trends: larger, newer houses tended to have a specific kitchen area not too far from the entrance, whereas in older houses the cooking would take place further towards the back of the house.

During my stay, and my daily visits to the living room to have breakfast and dinner, or just to hang out, I experienced a fairly strong expectation to stay out of the kitchen, and I would cause surprise or confusion if I were to enter it in order to retrieve a spoon or put back milk or oats from breakfast. In the end, I resigned myself to that it was easier to stay out of it and instead let the women get things for me or put back dishes when I was finished with my meal - somewhat to my own embarrassment over being fairly useless. That being said, it was not unheard of for Mr. Ebenezer to be called to help out if extra hands were needed.

The backmost section of the house was organized as a roofed quad surrounding a central area that was open to the sky. According to informants, both my hosts as well as guides who manned Goldsmith Street's renovated houses, this is typical of traditional Tamil houses. I did however, only see this in somewhat larger residences, possibly indicating a building practice more usual for middle- or upper class residences. It was under this central opening that most of the cooking and food preparation traditionally happened, and it usually contained the fireplace. In the case of the Ebenezers, this was also a place for several beds and other furniture, and the place where part of the family slept at night.

As with the central passage through the house, the opening towards the sky probably serves

primarily to allow heat to escape, or increase the possibility of wind passing through, but it is its purpose as a kind of chimney that makes it ideal to locate the food preparation area under. This, in conjunction with being a sleeping area that made seemingly made it the most private area in the house, and subsequently an area where the women would sit. I rarely found myself moving into this area, not because I was told not to, but because it felt like an invasion of privacy after having observed how other males not of the immediate family generally avoided the back, and how it was a place where women and girls would retreat to in order to, I assumed, to be left alone together.

This tripartition of the house (or possibly a bipartition in smaller houses) of a seemingly increasing level of privacy and perhaps also femininity should not be taken as an absolute, nor can it necessarily be taken to be fully representational of all of Tranquebar, or even just its Christian residents, however the managing of spatial appropriateness - by which I mean how individuals place themselves in the space of the house according to what they deem socially acceptable - was an ongoing topic of conversation and observation for me during my stay. The innermost private areas cannot be said to be completely feminine, as they also featured the sleeping area of the husband alongside the wife, and the front area cannot be said to be completely masculine, as the entire family would come together to watch TV in the front living room, or attend chores on the porch. By observing the behaviour of visiting men and women from outside the immediate family, the pattern laid out above emerged. If the family is more fluid inside its own residence, outsiders are less so, and tend to stick to fitting spheres, though again there is no pattern without exceptions.

If one takes the notion of increasing privacy and increasing femininity as one moves deeper into the house (or rather, towards its back), then this seems to fit with Sherry Ortner's (1974, p. 78, 85) attempt to show how across many cultures, men are associated with common, public space, while women are associated with separate, private spaces. Ortner has been criticized for taking the bigendered division for granted, and for ignoring exceptions to this trend (Yanagisako & Collier, 1987), but as an observation of a general trend it does seem to fit with how Tranquebar men and women organize themselves within households a lot of the time.

In some ways there was a continuation of a managing of spatial appropriateness among members of the household as well. One source explained to me that after girls become "of age", the father of the family will generally avoid sitting next to them, as this may be

considered inappropriate. From personal experience, I also noted that few women, even after knowing them for several months, felt comfortable sitting directly next to me, the main exception to this being Akka.

Another informant asked me about the topic of public affection. Compared to my home country of Norway, where public hugs, kisses and handholding are fairly mundane and commonplace, I saw very little physical contact between opposite sexes, even among married couples. Strengthening my idea of an increasing privacy towards the back of the house, I was told that even married couples would retreat to their bedside to be intimate, even with hugs or kisses. We did not discuss the subject of intercourse, except for the informant stating that this was not considered appropriate before marriage among the Christian community - a sentiment I think was generally shared among Muslim and Hindu adults as well. Whether these sentiments were shared by young people yet to marry, I sadly could not quite figure out, as Tranquebar has a kind of age-gap, where most youth of 15-16 and up live elsewhere for schooling unless they are already employed locally. I did, however, on a visit to Tiruchirappalli (a larger city of nearly a million residents some five hours by train inland) receive at least one warning not to flirt with Tamil girls, a warning given to me by an earnest boy about 15-16 years old, who seemed eager for me to understand proper social conduct, whether this was because I was a foreigner, or because it was indecent in general.

#### Female Movement outside the House

During a conversation with a Danish retiree and her husband active in the Danish Tranquebar Association, who regularly visit and stay in Tranquebar, we began discussing the topic of gender and appropriate behaviour. I was told of one story where Karen, the head of the Association, arranged an interview between a Danish TV station and a local Tranquebar female resident who'd helped out the Association with its work. However, as the resident's husband was not present, she was loathe to stand alone with a male cameraman and journalist outside her home, and so Karen stood directly behind the camera as a form of security.

One night when about to visit this very Danish couple, Akka tried to call her husband by phone, in order to make him come back to the house to follow her the barely one hundred meters it would take to walk. When she could not reach him, I wondered aloud if it would be okay if I were to follow her there. I was at this point still somewhat unsure about what kind of relation was considered appropriate with her, even though I fondly referred to her as my big sister. She gave it some thought for a second, and then agreed. During our walk through the

dimly lit streets in the evening dark, I asked about why she did not want to go alone. The reason why offered was groups of youths who had been known to vandalize as well as to rob lone women who were out in the streets. The fear of robbery is relevant beyond the fear of violence or loss of ordinary valuables, as many Tamil women invest and wear golden jewellery as a kind of personal financial security.

We did not, at the juncture of our short trip, enter the topic of sexual assault and rape, as I considered it a bit too on the nose, given our then-current situation. I would however, later talk with several different women who all had stories of young men behaving inappropriately or violently against women in public areas. Groups of young men from the Pattinavar jati (the Fishermen caste-community) being specified as particularly dangerous or aggressive, although there was an ambiguity on whether the threat of robbery of jewellery or sexual assault which were the main concerns, as they were both brought up and mixed together. It is possible that they were closely associated with each other in the minds of my female informants.

Sexual assault, in more general terms, was also now and then in the media, with the rape of a female German tourist somewhere in Tamil Nadu occurring during my stay. It was covered both in newspapers and on TV, though the heightened profile was likely due to the involvement of a tourist, as opposed to the assault of a local woman. That does not mean that there was a dearth of such stories, however.

One story of sexual assault that was recounted particularly vividly to me, was a rape case which supposedly occurred on a parking lot right behind the Danish Fort, a place which I had walked through several times, and which is covered in dense coastal brush down to the beach. The girl had been gang-raped and killed, and the body found later. The story, however, did not end there. My informant, a middle-aged teacher belonging to the Lutheran community, spoke with a great of conviction about how the ghost of the deceased girl had possessed a friend. The possessed girl had been put up in the Redugadevi temple, a temple dedicated to an important goddess of the Fishermen community. Once there, she began listing the alleged names of the perpetrators of the rape and murder, and ordered them to be punished. As time went on, the boys/men were killed, one by one, sometimes by accidents, sometimes by suicide, and once they were all deceased, the possession of the girl was lifted, its purpose apparently at an end. I expressed my scepticism to my informant, but she did not relent. She pointed out the date at which the body was found, and offered to take me to the exact spot.



Despite being a middle-class-educated Christian, she had no doubts about the veracity of the spirit-possession, which echoes previous points about shared beliefs across the religious communities in Tranquebar. Lastly, the story, containing the figure of a female ghost possessing a female, situated in a temple dedicated to a female deity and ordering the punishment of her own rapists, struck me as having strong themes of feminine retribution against male-induced injustices. Whether it was objectively true or not, its potential use as a powerful deterrent, or as an empowering tool for the women telling it, should not be ignored.

From the sources presented above it might seem as though women are subject to strong restriction on movement, and while this is true in some aspects, it is also important to note that many women moved freely about in the streets during daytime, either as salespeople, servants or housewives performing chores or moving between home and workplace, or women going to the market. It is, considering the economic situation of many Tranquebar residents, difficult to create a situation where women would be restricted purely to the house all day, as work is difficult to come by and many men are unemployed or partially unemployed. Families are also often large, requiring a fair bit of work to care for, and even household chores can bring one outside, such as throwing away garbage, buying foodstuffs, and so on.

In the Christian community in particular, many men and women were teachers, at least among those I met, belonging to a local middle class and being able to speak some English and having a formal higher education. Many of these were employed at the different Christian schools in Tranquebar, but also some outside, including at non-religious schools, and thus they would have to take some kind of public transport to work.

Of particular note is perhaps the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church's Teacher Training School, whose headmaster and administrator, a woman, I was able to interview and speak with several times. While there, I noticed that most of the student body was female, and this was apparently a fairly recent demographic shift due to government policies and funding. The headmaster, the first female one of the school, did not deliberately offer any general insights into gender and her role as a high-ranking functionary, but she is one of several instance of women in considerable ranks that add nuance to the idea of Tamil or more specifically Tamil Christian women as without agency or mobility in public space, even if it is curtailed by notions of propriety and fears of violence. Indeed, when asking a young woman who was a relative of the Ebenezers and had come to stay with them, I learnt that despite a strong

shyness when around me which one might take for a form of traditional aversion to strange men, she was currently in the process of taking a doctorate in mathematics, and so a person who was not only well-accomplished in a male-dominated sector, but also far beyond me in terms of academic credentials. Mrs. Ebenezers stated, after this revelation, that “times were changing”, and such change does not necessarily mean the eradication of traditional forms of etiquette or certain gendered power structures.

### On Women's Rank & Status Within the Churches

Christian clergy has traditionally been all male, although in recent decades, a number of churches and denominations have opened for female priests. Even in churches where women are barred from priesthood or other clerical roles, they have found specific niches or positions from whence to influence religious communities or exercise some measure of authority or power.

In TELC, I met with a female priest-in-training early on, and spoke with her briefly. She was guest-preaching in Tranquebar as a part of her education, and seemed well-liked by those I spoke with. There appeared to be no controversy on a local scale with women priests, although it is difficult to say whether this impression continued to be valid for the clergy itself at higher levels in the Church. Additionally, evidence from individuals such as the female head of the Plutschau Teacher Training Institute indicates that while it is hard to say that women were not discriminated against, there were certainly openings or opportunities for women to gain important positions with the TELC. On a more informal level too, did women make themselves noticed, as they were among the most vocal and active participants in the church services, engaging with the priest in a kind of back-and-forth when it came to finding Bible verses, or to answer the priest's questions to the congregation. I also witnessed how women were often highly active in organizing events, though I did not directly witness planning sessions for religious holidays.

Diving into history, we also find that women were highly active in missionary activity, though chiefly in the form of being the wives of missionaries. The Christian married couple served as an important archetype for Protestants preaching abroad and attempting to “uplift” women to what was seen as a less marginalized position, into a more companionate-style marriage, and also offer women vocational training, and training in reading and writing, mainly for the purposes of Bible study (McCulloch, 1996, p.155-160). The Church of Sweden, once a main funder of the Lutheran missions that would become the TELC, also employed a number of

notable women who acted as missionaries in Tamil Nadu the 1900s, such as Esther Peterson, who founded several schools around Madurai, or Ellen Nordmark, who campaigned against female infanticide and promoted vocational training such as tailoring (Mallika Pinniyavathi, 2011, p.56-57).

Catholicism contains what can appear as a kind of contradiction: on the one hand, femininity is exalted in the figure of the Virgin or Mother Mary, while on the other hand, women are barred from the priesthood. In the case of Tranquebar, with its strong presence of women through the St. Theresa convent, the voice of Catholic women in religious life was still strong, however. The St. Theresa convent was not under the parish priest, but rather administratively under the diocese, and as such had a hierarchy that was parallel rather than under the parish. In practice, the two usually worked together fairly closely, with nuns attending Mass in the Holy Rosary Church, and the priest visiting the convent to give eucharist, for example.

Additionally, nuns were employed in the Catholic schools and medical offices around Tranquebar, and made up a large share of the Catholic professional “man”power as it was perceived outwardly by the general public, being teachers, nurses, hostel caretakers and in general being very visible in the town at large.

It can be tempting to compare the role of women in the Christian denominations in Tranquebar to that of the Hindu women that made up the majority, however it is difficult to ascertain anything in particular. In somewhat of a parallel or analogous pairing to the Catholic Church, the Fishermen caste maintained their main temple to the goddess Redugadevi, who is considered to drive off diseases, but women did not hold any position in the caste panchayat (council) to my knowledge, and neither were they listed as primary donors for the upkeep of the temple, as evidenced by the banners that would be used to announce such laudable actions, which usually featured a headshot of the donor. Tranquebar did not have any active devadasis either, who are women dedicated to serving a goddess as a form of temple servant or priestess, and renounces marriage, as outlined in Lucinda Ramberg’s *Given To the Goddess* (2014).

### Men & Masculinity

The issue of studying masculinity can be a tricky part of anthropology, as in many ways it is perceived as the “normal” or “default”, both in an endemic sense, but often also by the visiting ethnographer. I, too, was not free of this bias, and in my fieldwork I usually focused on ideas of femininity or the situation of women as that was what appeared most notable to

me. However, that is of course not to say that masculinity and male ideals are of no importance.

A long-running theme for many of the men I spoke with was the desire to be provider for the family, and the issues that came with this as many traditional professions such as fishery, agriculture or carpentry became less monetary rewarding. The large scale of unemployment meant that for a good deal of men, it was impossible to live up to the ideals they had been brought up, and this was on more than one occasion a source of conflict – especially when different men were put up against each other.

In one case, I had a conversation with one of my informants who was a museum guard and caretaker. When he realized I knew a certain Mr. Samuel, he expressed frustration and resentment, as Mr. Samuel had unduly fired him from his previous job, and with some alleged outstanding pay. I felt stuck in-between two informants that I both knew fairly well and liked, but unable to pick any sides, so I hastily excused myself as best I could, saying that I was sorry about the events, but that there was nothing I could do.

In another case, while speaking with a group of men lounging outside in the late night to capture the cool evening breeze from the sea, I was introduced to a local leader of the Dalit activist group. The Dalit leader inquired who I knew in the town, and upon hearing the name of one of my primary interpreters, he scoffed a little, and said something to the effect of “you should not listen to him, he is no real man”. Curious, I inquired why this was so, but the men around us were quick to shift the conversation away from this topic, and the Dalit leader merely mumbled “oh, it’s nothing. Don’t think about it.” This quick and sudden shift from open dismissal to reneging after I had shown interest was fascinating, but difficult to interpret. In the end, it is hard for me to tell exactly why they seemed to think less of my interpreter, though I came down to two possible conclusions: either it was the issue of him gaining what they saw as an unduly large amount of work from foreign visitors (which is a limited resource that many desire), or it was that his wife earned more money than him, and was of a higher caste – their marriage having been a love-marriage. It is also possible that it was a combination, and that the combination of factors made it easier for them to criticise him.

## **Summary**

Tranquebarians move through the social arena of the town carrying many different identities

and roles, and the importance of each can oscillate depending on the situation. Caste-based and gendered restrictions on mobility can reduce one's access to the public space, or make one peripheral to holy rituals. These do not necessarily vary across religious groups, but rather make up another commonality that tie Tranquebarians together with a common form of social "language".

That is not to say that differences do not exist, and depending on the specific intersectional combination of gender, class, caste, religion and so forth, one may gain access or be excluded from different spaces or networks.

Even with restrictions in mind, however, there was still room for resistance and negotiation. While the room to negotiate was not unlimited, the example of Mrs. Ebenezer and her once alienated family, the Dalit (outcaste) political leader, or the female Headmaster of the Teacher Training Institute show that change was not only possible, but a part of the social environment itself.

# Chapter 5: Transnationality & Modernity

*Bent Eilif Noddeland*

## **Introduction**

This chapter is primarily focused on spotlighting how processes of recent modernity affect social life in Tranquebar. These come in different forms, both on individual and institutional levels.

In this chapter I will look into how the contemporary presence of NGOs (Non-governmental organizations) and the tourism industry shape a certain view of history and Tranquebar as place as well as self-reflecting on the identity of Tranquebarians and visitors. I will further go on to see how conflicts can arise from this presence, as various actors have different degrees of insight and agency when it comes to accessing information or even capital that relates to the NGOs and tourists. I will also shed light on how Tranquebar's past as a Christian stronghold, and its current Christian presence is used in both preservation and tourism marketing, and also how religious identities can cause different responses to the renewed foreign presence. The confusion created by the activities the mixed NGO-tourism complex creates a great deal of confusion and produces rumours, which will form the ending part of the chapter.

For the purposes of clarity, I've attempted to keep NGO activity and the tourism industry separated in this text, but this is a largely an artefact of analysis, and does not wholly represent the reality on ground level, as will become evident.

## **A History of Transnationality**

Tranquebar is enmeshed in a historical web of international trade and traffic, both in terms of goods and people, but also ideas and concepts. Previous chapters in this text have mentioned how from the earliest known historical mentions of settlements on the Coromandel Coast, long-distance trade has been an important activity that shaped the locales through which the flow was conveyed. By the time Europeans colonialists arrived in search of land leases with which to leverage more control over the spice trade, this oceanic contact was already ancient. It is worth repeating some important aspects of this transnational development. While the below history will mainly focus on the Protestant international connections, it should be noted that similar networks existed for other denominations, most notably the Portuguese and later

French support of Catholic missionaries, and British support of Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian missionaries.

The arrival of European individuals such as Danish colonial governor Ove Gjedde and his subsequent agreement with the Tamil Nayak Rangunatha in the 1620s made the pre-existing oceanic trade more immediate, however, and this is a process that can be said to have been repeated and accelerated as time has progressed. Even if Denmark's overseas possessions were not by themselves game-changing, they were a part of the much larger trend of European colonialization that altered the global geopolitical landscape, and by extension the patterns of international trade. In many cases, long chains of middlemen, whether Ottoman Turk or Egyptian, were eliminated by such trading posts and colonies. Moreover, the elimination of such middlemen also meant that a large barrier to renewed organized missionary activity was made much less formidable.

By the time the Danish king Christian IV dispatched the pietist German missionaries Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plutschau, and when they arrived in the colony of "Trankebar" on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July 1706, missionary efforts had already been underway in the region for some time through mostly Catholic missionaries, but to the modern-day Tranquebarian Protestants, this arrival is regarded as a watershed in terms of the spread of ideas. With Ziegenbalg came Protestantism, and with it came a desire to translate the Gospel to a language the Tamils could understand. In only a few years, Ziegenbalg is believed to have learnt enough of the Tamil language – both colloquial and scholarly forms – to not only write a Tamil dictionary and a book detailing his understanding of the local form of Hinduism, but also the first ever version of the New Testament in Tamil. Thanks to the missionaries bringing with them a printing press, one of the first on the Indian subcontinent, these books could be printed and thus become comparatively widespread.

While TELC's hagiographic and larger-than-life popular image of Ziegenbalg is impressive, it is part of a more complex network. Ziegenbalg himself did found an Evangelical-Lutheran congregation in Tranquebar that would eventually become the TELC, but he never achieved many converts. Additionally, what kept this missionary work active was an ongoing support from patrons abroad, which, while intermittent and delayed by the travel times of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was still crucial in financing, supporting, and seemingly motivating Ziegenbalg, as well as other Protestant missionaries in Southern India, as Edward Andrews (2017) explores in his essay "*Tranquebar: Charting the Protestant International in the British Atlantic and Beyond*". Andrews notes several active players in this web of missionary activity with regards

to securing financial patrons in the burgeoning missionary societies in Protestant countries. These include countries such as Denmark-Norway, Germany, Great Britain and the United States of America. He also notes how writers from these distant and far-flung regions could maintain correspondences that helped put their work in a larger context, motivated them, and helped made them feel a part of a larger and meaningful work. It was through such correspondences that the Tranquebar mission kept its funding after royal patronage from the Danish-Norwegian king ended. First through organization such as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK, British Anglicans), Leipzig Mission, and the German Halle University, then later through the Church of Sweden Mission (Andrews, 2017, p. 4, 12, 18). This helps explain why many later missionaries working from Tranquebar were Swedes, why the first ordained Bishop of the indigenized TELC was a Swede of origin, and even why to this day there is a large building next to the New Jerusalem Church called the “Church of Sweden Mission House” which is used to house the parish priest and clerical or academic visitors.

When the Danish sold off their Indian holdings to the British East Indian Company in 1845, administration and economic activities were then transferred to the British administration. The missionary work continued unabated, however, funded primarily by Swedish and German missionary societies, and spreading out a network of parishes, schools, women’s organizations and other institutions across south-eastern India, in today’s Tamil Nadu. Through the years 1919-1921 the Lutheran missions organized together into the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church, and elected and ordained its first leader, the titular Bishop of Tranquebar, and with it came Tamil as a liturgical language. While the TELC was by no means economically independent by this point, its incorporation as a single, discrete entity with a ceremonial seat in Tranquebar and its main administrative seat in Tiruchirappalli, meant that the transnational connections took on another form. No longer were most Lutheran personnel in Madras State (modern day Tamil Nadu) missionaries from Europe working for a limited time “abroad”: rather they were employees working in the land of their own Church. By 1947-1954, with the independence of India as a sovereign nation and the subsequent inauguration of a native Indian bishop a few years later, the shift of weight of leadership and heritage had come far.

To present the historical process of colonialization and mission activity followed by decolonialization and indigenization as a simple, linear historical process, while tempting and very clean, would be incorrect. Even in 2016, my informants lamented the need for foreign



monetary aid, though Indian legislation has clamped down on the flow of monetary support for religious organizations from abroad. During an interview with the director of the Ziegenbalg Spiritual Centre, he mentioned an attempt to get money for the restoration of the building from Germany that unfortunately fell through. Meanwhile, a representative of the Halle Mission had lived in Tranquebar for some time, leading the project to restore the historical residence of Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg. After an evening of discussing the practical problems of restoration, including the proper usage of funds and the struggle to get the proper permits from multiple instances both governmental and clerical, she explained that the work that the Halle Mission was laying down in the building was strictly non-religious, a necessary clause in order to be allowed to finance the work by the Indian state. She herself was happy with this arrangement, intending the restored building to be a museum first and foremost, but when compared to the frustrations and disappointments experienced by the director of the Spiritual Centre, it was clear that the TELC, as well as other incorporated Churches in Tamil Nadu, were not fully economically independent, and that transnational relations with former “missionary powers” were still of considerable importance.

The issue of economic independence was somewhat of a thorn to some, with one priest of the Church of South India from outside of Tranquebar expressing some disdain for what he saw as Lutheran mismanagement, while a lay member of Tranquebar’s Lutheran sharing with me a widespread rumour that “the French” were supporting the Catholic institutions in Tranquebar. Exactly who or what French were doing this was impossible to verify, but clearly, many different people had different ideas of not only where money came from, but also who ought to have that money, or perhaps equally importantly, who ought to control the flow of that money.

The pattern of past relations being promoted in the contemporary era could be found in the secular NGO presence as well as the tourism industry, and the critical view of foreign capital flow and control was usually close at hand whenever the former was discussed. This landscape of mixed non-profit and for-profit work will be discussed next.

### **The Tourism & NGO Industry**

A modern sign of the transnational relations Tranquebar finds itself in, is the presence of multiple active NGOs and a burgeoning, if relatively small, tourism sector. In Tranquebar NGO work and tourism is closely related, as NGO workers and tourists tend to come from the

same countries, mainly India itself, Germany and Denmark. Conflating the two activities further, some NGO work, such as building restoration, is done in order to aid tourism, while similarly, tourism serves as a motivator for NGOs to help in restoration, as it keeps emphasizing the presence of noteworthy buildings and landmarks.

However, what tourists and NGOs find noteworthy about Tranquebar can clash with what locals desire for their town, and so there can be conflict around where to allocate money and work, what permits to get, and so forth. These at times difficult relationships will be discussed in this section. I have, as far as I've seen reasonable attempted to split tourism and NGO-work into two different sections for ease of reading, however as the text progresses, it will become apparent that such a clear-cut separation is not really tenable in the field.

### **NGO Work in Tranquebar**

Non-governmental organizations have been involved in Tranquebar for many decades, including INTACH (“Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage”) and the Danish Bestseller Fund, a charitable organization run by the owners of the Bestseller textile wholesaler concern. Radical change came however, in the aftermath of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. While the immediate consequences were widespread destruction and hundreds of dead, more long-term consequences have also been an influx of charitable capital, numerous restoration and development projects, and increased attention from NGOs, such as the HOPE Foundation, the Danish Tranquebar Association, and new projects from INTACH and Bestseller. The historical context of this has been discussed briefly in the outline of the history of Tranquebar, but I will now delve more into the contemporary local politics and affairs of the NGO sector.

Numerous projects were started beyond the direct the aftermath of the tsunami disaster, and some of these will serve as highlighted examples to take a more critical look at how their presence has shaped the social as well as physical scene in Tranquebar.

One of these projects was the restoration of Goldsmith Street, a residential street that runs close to the coast which was almost completely devastated by the tsunami. INTACH and Bestseller aimed to purchase the ruined houses and restore them according to traditional Tamil building styles, and then rent them out for tourists or for community events. Today Goldsmith street is used by INTACH after its renovation as an example of vernacular Tamil

house style to “educate and inspire” residents and tourists (Jørgensen, p225). There are, however, more complex feelings tied into the events surrounding the restoration project, which may limit the degree to which it can “inspire” locals.

Writing about the development projects, Jørgensen spoke with neighbours and former owners of the redeveloped and restored traditional Tamil homes there. The neighbours saw the restored houses as a positive, citing their improved looks, however more important was the rise in property prices, which opened the possibility of selling their own homes at a profit in the future, although not all had such plans, and some rejected this outright.

Some of the former owners, however, felt “tricked” into selling their ruined homes too cheaply, being caught in a vulnerable position as they were effectively homeless and with few options to fund new home. Many had also been fearful of more tsunamis back then and so were convinced to sell the property at a very cheap price compared to what they had been worth only a short time before. They now found that the properties had risen dramatically in value. One of the interviewees reported feeling a personal loss at having sold their family’s land in desperation, which they would not have done if given more of a choice. (Jørgensen, 2014, p.184-185).

Speaking with my informers, one of whom was likely the broker who was reportedly “pressuring” them to sell, I arrived at the same impression, though the broker gave a version where they felt used and in turn “hoodwinked” by Bestseller, having been under the impression that the houses would be used for community projects and activities, instead of standing largely empty, as they currently do most of the time. There was some resentment towards Bestseller, based on what they had perceived as promises to keep the purchased land and buildings open and free to use by the locals, whereas now, for example, the local park constructed by the Fund was locked behind a wall and gates, and a local coconut grove which had been seen as a community project was similarly locked off and of no use to anyone I spoke with.

My informant, the broker who had worked with selling the ruined houses to Bestseller, also pointed out what they saw as hostile rumours about them and the money they had earned helping out Bestseller. The broker was upset that people thought they had done it for the money, and said that they were in fact working many more hours than what they were being paid for, as they wanted the sales to benefit their neighbours. Ultimately it comes down to who one chooses to believe regarding the perceived injustices of such affairs.

### Differences in Renovation Priorities

There are also other ways in which the priorities of NGOs and local groups can clash, which come down to differences of priorities and outlooks. Several such cases have been when working with the renovation or preservation of religious buildings or facilities, wherein the concerns of the NGO and the religious institution can clash, and local residents do not shy away from criticizing the choice of buildings renovated either, if they disagree with the NGOs.

One TELC employee told Jørgensen that “the Danes” (the Danish Tranquebar Association), in their preservation efforts, were not putting enough emphasis on religious buildings, and instead of helping with maintaining still-used buildings such as the New Jerusalem Church, the old Ziegenbalg residence, or Zion Church, they were focusing on maintaining the Dansborg fort. In a word, they were prioritizing Danish-built memories of colonialism above Danish-built religious facilities that were still in use. Highlighting the secular, and long-gone impact, and essentially neglecting the religious, and still-present impact, in his impression (Jørgensen, 265-266).

As another example of contrasting priorities, it has become popular to paint the compound walls of buildings owned by Christians institutions with quotations from the Bible or slogans, in alternating Tamil and English translations – occasionally with spelling mistakes, such as on the Ziegenbalg Spiritual Centre or the New Jerusalem Church. This has been a matter of contention with preservation NGOs, such as INTACH and the Danish Tranquebar Association, and even tourism agents, who see it as ahistorical. Upon further negotiations between preservationists and the TELC regarding the colour choice of the Ziegenbalg Centre, not the slogans themselves, an official of the TELC seemed happy to go along with a repainting of the Ziegenbalg Centre as long as it was funded by the Tranquebar Association, seeing it essentially as an opportunity for free maintenance (Jørgensen, 2014, p. 154-156).

The TELC has also disregarded the advice and urgings of the Tranquebar Association and INTACH on several occasions when they see preservation as a less important concern than developing their properties and buildings for current and future use, such as in the case of an old gate to the Teacher Training Institute which they tore down to improve access while the representatives of the Tranquebar Association were home in Denmark (Jørgensen, 2014, p. 156).

With the mentioned NGOs as well as several more, including many which have only been briefly active, local residents are often unclear on who is conducting what restoration work. They frequently find the relations between NGOs, governmental agencies and other activists confusing and obscure, and may mix them up, or even not recollect their names correctly, or use informal names instead, such as referring to the Danish Tranquebar Association as the “Denmark Association”, and seeing it as a representative for the Danish government (Jørgensen, p196-197). After spending six months trying to get some understanding of this web of partners and different projects, I had a great deal of sympathy, as even some of my more informed informants found the administrative landscape difficult to navigate. With such a confusing plethora of agents, many simply rely on what they hear from their neighbours, and rumourmongering is widespread.

Jørgensen cites several examples of people circulating rumours of expected help with development, often from non-specific “they”, either Danish individuals, NGOs or the Indian government. One woman living by the town gate was under the impression that the Danish Crown Prince would arrive and rebuild the town wall and help with relocation of those living around it. Another woman, a Catholic Christian living in the southern parts of the town, not far from the fort, had observed many people come and go to do surveys on the old town wall, and hope they would rebuild it, as well do build new roads from the front of the town down to the sea and fort, with even a harbour. She expressed dissatisfaction with how this part of the town had been neglected after the tsunami, whereas the Fishermen has received much help.

By the time I did my fieldwork, the proposed road, running along the outside of the old town, had been constructed, though no work on the town wall or a harbour had been made. There existed promotional material for a “Tranquebar boating association” that could use such a harbour, but this was theoretical. Another example was a Muslim family living next to the Buckingham Canal, and right by an old, dilapidated but still visible bastion of the town wall. The family living there had been visited many times by visiting scholars and officials and used these meetings to express their relation to the bastion in positive terms: they emphasised that they had never tore down bricks from it, wanted help to preserve it. This was however also of practical concerns, as the bastion kept the canal from eroding into their house and compound, and the owners were looking for help from external agents to prevent this from happening. (Jørgensen, p190-193)



*Figure 7. The "Land Gate", a structure from the Danish colonial period that is a tourism attraction.*

### **Tourism Industry in Tranquebar**

Tranquebar's tourism industry is limited. It is a small town, comparable in size to some of the coastal towns in Southern Norway where I grew up, with a small urban centre of a few thousand, and local villages and hamlets in the surrounding hinterlands numbering around

20,000 or so, urban centre included. It is over 6 hours from any large airport, and the rail connection, important for Indians, was cut off a long time ago. Simply due to lacking in size, location and availability of locales, international tourism here is by necessity going to be for those with a special interest, whether due to old colonial ties, or simply due to having a taste for the not-yet-quite-commodified. Local entrepreneurs are aware of much of this, and try to adapt to their limitations, and to cater to the tastes of the type of traveller who manages to find their way there. Indian tourists, often from other parts of Tamil Nadu who are out on a day-trip, are attracted by somewhat different things, such as the long beach, although colonial heritage is still worth a look.

Tour guides and promotional material frequently tries to evoke a sense of nostalgia in Danish visitors, using phrases such as “welcome to Denmark”. Similarly, coin sellers will approach visiting Danes with sales pitches like “Your national memory”. Several tourism brochures have used the phrase “here time stands still” about Tranquebar, and this has also been a slogan for the Neemrana Heritage Hotels. The presence of Northern European-influenced architecture and Protestant religious buildings are used as a unique selling point to set Tranquebar apart from its neighbours. Danish, and by extension Lutheran heritage is elevated to become postcard-material to outwards present the location as exotic and one-of-a-kind, from the pink-colored Dansborg fort, to the monogram-covered white walls of New Jerusalem Church.

The marketed sense of nostalgia is reciprocated by many Danes, as evidenced by various entries in the guest books of the Neemrana Heritage Hotels as well as the New Jerusalem Church, where entries that for example thank locals for “taking care” of the Danish colonial heritage, or wax poetic about the sensation of arriving in what was once “a small piece of Denmark on the other side of the world” can be found. There are more critical accounts, however, with at least one recorded message expressing some sense of apology or regret for the colonial era and its impact (Jørgensen, 2014, p.222, 232, 237-39, 243). Jørgensen goes on to write:

*“[Heritage] tourism becomes an occasion to contemplate historical identities associated with both what ‘we’ did during the colonial period, and how ‘they’ in the former colony might think of ‘us’ in the present.”*

Curiously, although given the shared Danish-Norwegian history of colonialism, I never felt any such nostalgia (or, for that matter, personal guilt), though whether this was due to my

personal temperament, or due to being a Norwegian and thus having been provided with a different set of “national nostalgias”, such as polar expeditions or Viking ocean voyages I do not know. Even though Norwegians, under the Dano-Norwegian crown, were active in crewing the boats that sailed to Tranquebar, and at least one Norwegian served as governor in the early 1800s, Norwegians have rarely heard of Tranquebar, and the understanding that this would also be a part of “my” national history never really went beyond an intellectual appreciation.

In terms of tourism development, Tranquebar, while often presented as “remote”, and certainly not metropolitan in any sense, it does have some strategic qualities. Tranquebar is situated practically along a stretch of road that goes along Chennai (the state capital with an international airport), Pondicherry (known for its French heritage), Chidambaram, Thanjavur, Tiruchirappalli and Madurai (all known for their large and important Hindu temples, some of which are on the UNESCO world heritage list). For domestic tourists, Tranquebar is also located close to the historical port of Poombuhar, Sufi Muslim dargah of Nagore, and the Catholic basilica of Velankanni, the latter two of which are also sites of religious pilgrimage which attract visitors from across religious boundaries, especially during certain festivals. Additionally, Tranquebar is centrally located along a pilgrimage route that connects many Hindu temples ordered by traditional Tamil astrological patterns (Jørgensen, 2014, p.230, 300).

### Confusions of Identity

An article in the Indian weekly magazine “The Week” expressed how “delightful” Tranquebar “still retained a touch of the Danes”. A travel article in the “New Indian Express” wrote that the Dansborg fort was a “stunning piece of Viking architecture”. In her writings, Jørgensen points to an interesting reflection of Western exoticizing orientalism: In order to attract domestic tourism, Indian writers and tourism officials are using an occidentalist language, where the influence of far-off-Denmark is presented as unique, interesting and exotic. A couple of Indian tourists, academics by trade, expressed enjoyment to Jørgensen at being in a place where “East meets West” (paraphrasing Kipling) (Jørgensen, 2014, p. 231-232).

Tourists to Tranquebar, as well as tourism agents, and even academics writing about tourism express some distaste over the concept of mass tourism, pointing out how tourism paradoxically crowds out the spaces that attracted tourists to begin with. Informants pointed



out how Goa and Pondicherry had changed, in their eyes for the worse, due to this. Additionally, the owners of Neemrana Hotels did not use the term “tourist” for their clients, but rather “visitors”, and continued a sense of high-prestige tourism to make more money off fewer visitors in order to preserve these spaces, in a word keeping them “authentic” according to the ideas and notions of the prospective visitor (Jørgensen, 232).

From a local perspective, the exact nationality of the former colonial powers isn’t necessarily all that important. When British author Georgina Harding stayed in Tranquebar for one year in 1990, she visited the nearby town of Nagapattinam, and was informed by the local priest of a church she visited that it had been built by the Danish. However, the inscription on the wall was Dutch, not Danish, and Nagapattinam had been part of the Dutch Coromandel. The priest expressed some surprise that Denmark was not a part of “Holland”, and quickly directed her to take a look at the CSI church, which had reportedly been built by the British. He made an account of a sequence of colonizers, which had in turn come, and driven each other out: Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British. Jørgensen also relays an event where she witnessed a preservation expert consistently refer to a “Dutch period” in Tranquebar (none such exists), while measuring the Masilamanan Nathar kovil, which caused her some consternation. Indeed, “Sura’s Tourist Guide to Tamil Nadu”, an Indian guidebook, manages to write about the Dansborg Fort: “built by... the commander of the Royal Dutch Navy... [e]ven today it exhibits Danish architecture”. This also seems to be part of a larger confusion between Danes and the Dutch, which goes from local people, all the way to the Tamil Nadu State Archives, which group historical records from the two colonial powers together – though when Jørgensen checked these records, they were all in Dutch (Jørgensen, 2014, p.253-256).

Such a variety of foreign influences adds to the confusion, and I frankly couldn’t blame people for not getting too heavily invested in keeping apart historical facts largely irrelevant to their daily lives.

### The Concept of Ur and Justifying Belonging

The confusion, conflation and mixing of colonial and historical memories and identities does not mean, however, that Tranquebarians did not have their own thoughts on the influx and flow of foreign nationals. The perceptions varied quite a lot, however, with different impressions about the motivations or goals of tourists, as well as NGO-workers. These could range from quite relaxed and impressions of benevolence, to more sceptical concerns, with

various entrepreneurial individuals focused more on how to gain access to the tourists' capital so as to build their own businesses, regardless of the wider social impact.

Both Jørgensen and I spoke with many who had different explanations or impressions of foreigners, in my case usually by accident. For example, a middle-aged Catholic woman named Rosie, when asked to explain why the Danes kept returning to Tranquebar, explained it thusly: "It was their own place, they once ruled here," keeping with colonial narratives (Jørgensen, 2014, p. 257). Phrased in Tamil, Tranquebar was "avangaludaya ur pola" - "like their 'ur'" (Jørgensen, 2014, p.257). When asking a trustee of one of the temples of Tranquebar about what the tourists came to see, Jørgensen received the answer: "After Danish people were buried in Tharangambadi, [the] foreigners... go and worship them." (Jørgensen, 2014, p.238)

E. Valentine Daniels, when writing about the Arnutannu Vellalar sub-caste of southern Tamil Nadu, emphasises the importance of the concept of "ur" which a few interviewees in Tranquebar mentioned, a term that is difficult to accurately translate into English, but which carries meanings such as village (the most common, nominative, matter-of-factly usage of the term), home, ancestral area, and so forth. People who inhabit a common territorial "ur" are believed to possess a common physicality derived from the very soil of that territory, one which also ties them to their genealogical and social ancestry. Additionally, an "ur" can be individually centred. A person with a certain routine of things, for example leaving the village every day to go to a market town, may consider that market town as part of their "ur" as well, as it enters into their established habitus, or mode of living. In some contexts, the word "ur" also means the general idea of "home". A Tamil person asking, "what is your 'ur'?", is really asking "what is your home". This meaning is furthermore segmentary, or fractal – If the question is asked to or by a foreigner, it implies curiosity about the home country, if it is asked to or by someone from a different Indian state, it implies the home state, and so on through district, taluk and village. (E. Valentine Daniel, 1987, p. 63-67)

Ironically perhaps, despite this idea of physical commonality, the substantialist division of caste remains, where different castes see each other as of different substance, or physical derivation, despite common residence. E. Valentine Daniel writes that a Brahmin caste saw their "cotan ur" ("real home") as being located elsewhere, and not in the village where they currently resided and shared the soil with several other, lower castes. This "cotan ur" may be a literal place, or it may be a distant, sometimes idealized or even mythical place. (E. Valentine Daniel, 1987 p.67-68)

The “ur”, thus conceptualized, makes the arrival of Danes and other former colonial generations later not some aberrant, incomprehensible event, but rather, quite in line with already present ideas in Tamil culture. Jørgensen also argues, that with this concept in mind, Tamil questions about whether Danes feel like they sense a kind of ownership or belonging to Tranquebar and its historical sites are not really postcolonial criticism, but rather curiosity about whether Danes feel some kind of connection to the place, or feeling at home there, due to the historical connections. Indeed, some might even insist on such a connection, as keeping in line with the traditional idea of the importance of an “ur” that roots a person in place and gives them a clearly defined position and stability – and furthermore a kind of expectation that the Danish should take “responsibility” for the crumbling colonial buildings in Tranquebar (Jørgensen, 257-258). In other words – to a number of Tranquebarians, it would be odd if the Danes did *not* find Tranquebar special enough to keep revisiting.

While the “ur”-concept helps explain the generally lax attitude many people had of heritage tourism with all its colonial overtones, this does not mean that everyone were of a similar impression. There were individuals that were suspicious of potentially malevolent motivations, and who kept historical narratives of foreign exploitation and abuse in mind when considering Danes or Germans visited, or did more than simply drop by for a few days.

#### Scepticism of Foreign Presence

A number of people had the impression that foreigners, sometimes identified specifically as Danes, were looking to buy property in Tranquebar, and many had received several offers. One woman interviewed stated, evidently in a humorous way, that since the Danes had once owned Tranquebar, they were coming to buy it back so they could own it again. The woman, a house-owner not currently looking to sell her house, added upon being asked how she felt about this, that she did not particularly care about politics, and it was irrelevant to her who ran Tranquebar, as long as it was properly managed and developed well.

Additionally, many Indians, from other parts, are also looking to purchase homes and properties in Tranquebar. Jørgensen also conducted an interview with a young man whose family’s home had been demolished to make room for development work, as it had been constructed on governmentally owned land, which had in turn been bought up by the Neemrana hotel chain. In this interview, the young man explained that the reason that the gate had been renovated, and that the walls were to be renovated, was not to benefit locals, but to benefit the Danish, who were apparently coming. The man stated that the old town of

Tranquebar was “a tourist area, and it is your area”, speaking to his Danish interviewer (Jørgensen, 2014, p.188-189, 194). Such a comment may express some degree of impotence, as development processes are being done not to serve the residents, but foreign tourism interest.

During my fieldwork, I was relayed a story of how a senior nun of the Catholic convent had accused the Danes of wanting to recolonize Tranquebar, in an outburst at an assembly with the Tranquebar Association. However, later, this attitude would change upon further cooperation, possibly as a result of traveling to Europe on invitation by the Association. This turn of attitude in itself did not go without comment, and at least one person considered it hypocrisy, though it seemed to me that perhaps the initial outburst was a result of pent-up frustration over friction with specific individuals and not necessarily a grand political statement about the state of post-colonial relations. This seems to be the typical form criticism of foreign presence takes: less a structural criticism, and more about difficult interpersonal relations, or scepticism of certain institutions. There was at least one more extreme case of scepticism, however.

On a trip to the city of Tiruchirappalli, I entered a conversation with a man on the train ride there. After he had inquired about my reasons for visiting India, and my background as an anthropology student, he confidently explained to me that the reason why “my state” supported this education and trip, was to train me into serving their needs and to use me as a kind of “agent<sup>2</sup> of sorts. This seemed to me, at the time, to mostly just be a statement about the self-interest of most nations and therefore quite uncontroversial. However, when put into the context of suspicions and negative associations with visitors from former colonizing countries, especially when it comes to those who are there on a kind of professional mission, it fits into a certain kind of pattern of defensiveness.

While this man’s attitude might appear overly suspicious, the context in which it’s been made does to some extent explain his suspicious view of me. With an influx of foreign capital and foreign visitors, whose motives and connections are largely unknown and highly confusing, who may start projects and end them, break public trust, hold different priorities and possibly seek to purchase property locally, he was not the only one expressing frustration. This ties into the issue of asymmetric postcolonial relations: where former colonizers return as tourists, aid-workers and investors, while the former colonized to some extent are still on the receiving end. This, as we shall see, is a bit of an oversimplification.

## Work Abroad & Remittances

When walking through Tranquebar, one could see many new houses rising, built with concrete and not bricks, and overall using more expensive materials, and incorporating fewer traditional elements in the process. A good deal of the money for these new houses had been earned abroad, as chiefly young or adult men left for other parts of India, or other countries to work, and send money home. Interestingly, when speaking with informants from different religious groups, it became clear that the groups tended towards different locations of work.

Several Muslims I spoke with reported having worked in the Persian Gulf states or the Arabic peninsula, with some having been in Indonesia, and when prompted, they also said that as far as they knew, this was what their co-religionists also had done. Jørgensen furthermore states that it was well-known that the Muslim population in the town particularly inhabited concrete houses, funded with money from transnational work migration to the Gulf countries and Singapore. This sentiment was echoed by locals as well as a visiting historian from Chennai (Jørgensen, 2014, p. 143-144).

Conversely, my Hindu informants, including one server at a local café stated it was more common for them to travel to South-East Asian states, with Singapore being a highly desired target, though again, Malaysia and Indonesia were not uncommon either. A neighbouring Christian family on the opposite side of Queen Street to where I lived, who had relatively recently built a new house, stated that they had relatives working in France, with some desiring to go to Britain. On the face of it, it can seem like foreign work locations were almost cleanly delineated along religious lines, but there are further complications.

Several Tranquebar residents expressed the opinion that the residents of Tranquebar, in light of their colonial heritage, should be given Danish citizenships. This had been expressed to Jørgensen, as well as to members of the Danish Tranquebar Association, as well as other Danish travellers. The desire for this comes primarily from prospects of work migration, with the possibilities of increased income through transnational remittances, an arrangement which already is possible for the citizens of the former French colonial India, who were given the option of keeping their French citizenships when France formally relinquished its rule in India. The comparison is a close one for the people of Tranquebar, who live only a few minutes' drive from the former French colony of Karaikal, today an exclave of Pondicherry state, and frequently compare the wealth in Pondicherry state favourably to their own state, Tamil Nadu (Jørgensen, 2014, p.261).

However, the idea goes further – with the recurring visits of Danes over many decades in the 20th and 21st centuries, often bringing opinions on preservation, and capital, some locals have expressed the opinion that there is a sense of unfairness over how the Danes can come freely to look at their former colony, while the people of Tranquebar cannot go and look at the country of their former colonizers. As one man from neighbouring Porayar put it, it is like a “one-way ticket”. This is a rather succinct take on the idea of power imbalances in postcolonial gazes. Another person, an older woman, felt that Danes were not “strangers” in Tranquebar, as they came so frequently and were so involved in goings-on. This could also be taken further, that Tranquebar people felt they should not be strangers to Denmark and be able to visit it too (Jørgensen, 2014, p.267-268).

### Rumours

In many cases, people had little more than rumours to help them understand why certain people were there, what they were doing, and where they were from. Given the lack of official, unambiguous information, both tourism and other forms of activity was put into pre-existing narratives and understandings of what was going on. This remained equally true for the activities of the various NGOs that came, went or stayed for the long haul, or for tourists who, while usually only there for a few days or a couple of weeks at most, were a constant presence collectively, and whose presence was courted by both private entrepreneurs, NGOs and governmental agencies, sometimes at odds with the priorities of locals.

Jørgensen writes that rumour, while often dismissed as “unreliable oral information”, is also a potentially rich source for understanding the societies in which they circulate and refers to an analysis by Louise White where she studied vampire rumours in colonial Africa. (Jørgensen, 2014, p. 190).

Rumours represent a window into which values, concerns and aspirations can be gleaned. If there are rumours about some people working unduly close with foreigners and NGOs and reaping too much money from this, it can tell us of how access to development money, and access to both personal and professional relations to foreigners, investors and NGO representatives is a competitive market, and an arena in which there are, evidently, winners and losers. The content of such rumours can help elucidate what are considered legitimate methods of getting access to these resources. If there are rumours about foreigners coming to reclaim “their” former lands, this helps us explain perceptions of belonging and the

motivations of foreigners, or perhaps rather “post-colonists”. There are new, and growing arenas for the spreading of rumours, however.

### Rumours on Social Media

Starting a couple of decades ago, a number of Christian Tranquebarians gained access to religious satellite channels, chiefly financed by, or showing broadcasts from American evangelist groups and Pentecostal movements, which had been increasing drastically since the 1980s. Indeed, some American or British Evangelical preachers were household names among my informants, including non-Pentecostals. While my landlord’s family did not watch these channels frequently, they had no issue switching over to them, and showing. In these shows, the need for conversion and missioning in India was highlighted, and associations between Indian traditional religion and culture were explicitly associated with modern problems of poverty, for instance, claims that were based on largely unverified claims based on mostly vague generalizations.

With the advent of cheaper and widely accessible data for mobile phones, social media became increasingly more important, and most of my informants were registered on multiple platforms or apps. These apps also became involved in the “rumour-mill”, but instead of using a centralized broadcaster like satellite TV, this was in many ways a return to, or an extension of the traditional individual-to-individual “grapevine” form. During my stay, several of my informants pulled out their phones to show me what they considered to be relevant information for my research as they understood it, and in some cases I was able to research these rumours further.

Chiefly, the social media app used by my informants was WhatsApp, a social networking app where one can create messaging lists, so that items of news spread very quickly, and importantly, usually comes from friends, family and acquaintances. This peer-to-peer model means that few of my informants felt they had any reason to doubt the veracity of the stories they were given, as the people who had shared them were trusted.

Over the course of several months, some of the “viral” rumours turned out to be highly dubious when I fact-checked them. A non-religious example was a rumour about Coca-Cola and Pepsi being tainted by AIDS-infected blood, a rumour that turned out to be a wandering urban myth originating in the early 2000s, its resurfacing in Tamil Nadu perhaps being related to an ongoing feud between foreign soda brands and local ones that was occurring in the news at the time.

Most of the rumours my informants showed me were religious in nature, however, and usually served to paint a grim picture of persecution of Christians in India, although always located in some other part of the country. For example, according to one social media post, a priest had suffered a religiously motivated attack by Hindutva activists, and was requesting prayers and aid. However, upon further research, the district where the attack was supposed to have occurred did not actually exist, nor does India use the term “district” in any formal way, meaning that the story had either been severely transformed, or was an outright fabrication.

Another example was a video of a violent murder of a woman, where a crowd of people could clearly be seen jeering at a woman while she was burned to death. I was deeply shocked to see this clip, as I could only conclude that it was, in fact, very real. However, upon inspection, the claims attached to the video, that she was a Christian convert burnt by Hindu nationalists turned out to be false: the video, while real, depicted a mob killing in Latin-America.

The above examples should not be taken to mean that all such social media items were falsified or inaccurate, but even when they were plausible, it was hard to verify anything. Reports of attacks on Christians in various areas for eating or transporting cattle existed, and were also known from newspaper or TV news reports, but whether the specific examples I was shown, or indeed whether Christians were targeted specifically was impossible for me to ascertain.

While it might seem like an easy way out to simply blame such confusion of facts on many people being relatively new adopters of social media, this problem is not much different from what has been observed in Western, developed countries, and so it is probably best considered a local iteration of an ongoing, global issue where information is so plentiful and overwhelming, and virtual social spaces so immediately accessible, that they are quite easily misused for confusion and misleading. This in many ways reflects the plethora of information on the many agents in Tranquebar, and the confusion and uncertainty surrounding them.

## **Summary**

In Tranquebar, NGOs and tourists represent a re-visitation and re-actualization of old colonial bonds. With an increasing influx of foreign interest comes an increasing access to economic means, but they methods by which these are accessed by locals, and what the goals and intentions of foreign capital-holders (donor, investors, philanthropists, tourists, etc.) often



remain a mystery. This mystery causes confusion and can lead to frustration and suspect attitudes among locals who are affected by what they see as not only a chaotic and unpredictable financial and project-landscape, but also a keen asymmetry in power relations that can be seen as analogous to a former colonial situation.

In an ecosystem of somewhat unpredictable transnational relations, many turn to rumour-mills or even newer versions, such as social networks. These in turn, also play on national Indian turmoil to deliver a version of society that, while often inaccurate, can play up latent insecurities.

Jørgensen refers to Tranquebar as: “neither simply [...] a colony, nor [...] a not-a-colony, but rather [...] a postcolony, entangled in multiple and shifting constructions of history” (2014, p.219), and it is as such it must be viewed: where history is reconstituted based on present needs, and where the foreign and national merge in a complex network that can be perceived differently by local actors based on their differing concerns or aspirations.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion & Religious Identity Revisited

### Recapitulation & Digest

Throughout this text, the purpose has been to attempt to answer the question posited at the beginning: how Christians in Tranquebar related to (1) other locally present religious groups (2), each other (3) as well as interacted across other social categories such as class, caste and gender, (4) and how they were situated in state & cross-national relations. The question of how this social identity affects those who are considered Christians within the social arena of Tranquebar as community and social space has driven what issues have been highlighted throughout the text, even when the direct relation to this question of identity has not been immediately apparent.

In chapter one, the regional and historical context was provided in order to give the reader a more in-depth understanding before diving into the specific contemporary matters that would be covered later. Already, issues such as Tranquebar's background as a postcolony and historical bastion of missionary activity was highlighted, which would become relevant later.

In chapter two, the coexistence of the different religious communities in Tranquebar was explored, with an analysis that moved from highlighting the "banality" of common forms of expression through symbols or greetings, to the more consciously managed social activities that include aspects of both inclusion and exclusion of cross-religious members. Moving on to the institutionalized side of Tranquebar's religious coexistence through schools and the relative absence of religious missioning, the existence of a largely unspoken understanding of non-proselytising in order to preserve a kind of equilibrium was identified.

The equilibrium maintained through aspects of both inclusion and exclusion can help us understand the contents of chapter three, which served mainly to show the forms that the different religious congregations in Tranquebar take, and how members can flow between these without necessarily losing access to any, or how non-Christians can gain access to, or have obligatory access. Paralleling chapter two, chapter three showed how while social presence of Hindus in churches was largely tolerable by Hindu caste panchayats, the issue of conversion was strongly opposed. The existence of hybridized spaces, such as the Fortune-Teller Swamy could be seen as being one method of bridging such a gap, while the aggressive proselytizing of the pentecostalists can be seen as overriding the idea of equilibrium

altogether, an act of proactive Christianity which was both seen as suspect and admirable by different Christian informants. Moreover, the chapter showed how the Christian churches could not claim to be entirely unified, with the example of internal differences in the TELC which hampered their effectiveness outwardly.

In chapter four and five, we explored other aspects of Tranquebar that do not immediately fall under the direct theme of religious identity. Instead, these chapters served to add increased nuance to the understanding of actors within the social spaces of the area, and by extension, Christians in the area. As Christian identity intersections with gender, caste and class, new permutations of social restriction or privilege emerges, though these are not set in stone, and vary even between denominations and congregations, while on the other hand having parallels to the experiences of non-Christians, showing again, the underlying fundament of a shared cultural language of expression in Tranquebar, the theme of chapter one. With the added complexity of transnational relations with regards to foreigners coming either as NGO-workers or tourists, more identity-permutations and more opportunities and restrictions enter to complicate the social arena, which led to the chapter highlighting the confusion and frustration experienced at times by locals.

In all of these topics, I have attempted to explore and understand the lived life of the Tranquebarian Christians. The balance between adding nuance and providing a clear analysis is one that has been difficult to tread, but a over-arching understanding has hopefully been presented through the chapters.

### **Closing Remark**

Christians in Tranquebar make up a demographic minority, but have a strong presence in the town based on their long history there, and prominent position both due to the presence of many historical monuments created by and for Christian worship, but also due to the density of Christian educational institutions, which give them an influential niche to dominate.

With the niche as both historical “relics” that attract NGOs and tourists, and as providers of education, the Christians in Tranquebar find themselves in a good position to appear as positive additions to the town, and with the added absence of overt proselytizing, the “equilibrium” of Tranquebar, though potentially threatened, makes being a Christian for Tranquebarians a largely positive and accepted identity, that primarily lend them access to opportunities rather than close them off, or cause others to be hostile and reject them. The exception here is for converts, as the issue of conversion remains fraught with tension –

though a tension that varies depending on caste origin, as not all caste communities exert the same kind of social control on their members.

Additionally, Christian Tranquebarians must first and foremost be understood as Tranquebarians – that is, they participate in the same cultural forms of identity communication, hold many of the same values, and together with Muslims and Hindus make up a local community that has more similarities than differences, and perhaps equally importantly, know how to perform these similarities through public displays or interpersonal relations to normalize each other.

This, in summary, is why I chose to call my thesis “The Place Where Waves and Religions Sing,” as Tranquebar is not simply a place where the waves continuously roll over the dark, sandy beach, but a place where its inhabitants continuously, metaphorically or not, continuously “sing”, or communicate their identities, and by doing so, help normalize each other, and their relations with each other. This “song” may not always be harmonious, but by now the choir of religions, castes and other identities are so well-versed in participating together that most disharmonies are ignored or shrugged off rather than escalated to anything else. May it continue to be the place where waves and religions sing.

## References:

- Andrews, E. E. (2017), Tranquebar: charting the protestant international in the British Atlantic and beyond, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 74:1, p. 3-34.
- Berremen, G. D. (1960), Caste in India and the United States, *American Journal of Sociology*, 66: 2, p. 120-127.
- Billig, M. (1995), *Banal nationalism*, London: SAGE.
- Candea, M. (2007), Arbitrary locations: in defence of the bounded field-site, *Journal of the royal anthropological institute*, 13, p. 167-184.
- Daniel, E. V. (1987), *Fluid signs: being a person the Tamil way*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Douglas, M. (1984), *Purity and danger: an analysis of the concepts of collusion and taboo*, London: Routledge
- Dumont, L., (translation Sainsbury, M.) (1970), *Homo hierarchicus: the caste system and its implications*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Eriksen, T. H. (2007), Complexity in social and cultural integration: some analytical dimensions, *Ethnic and racial studies*, 30:6.
- Fluehrr-Loban, C. (1994), Informed consent in anthropological research, *Human organization*, 53:1, p. 1-10.
- Geertz, C. (1993), Religion as a cultural system, *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*, (ed.) Geertz, C., p.87-125. Fontana Press.

Grønseth, K. B., (2007) *A little piece of Denmark in India: the space and places of a South Indian town, and the narratives of its peoples*, (Master's thesis, University of Oslo, Oslo Norway), retrieved from: <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/16719>

Helles, K. (2013): *Tranquebar under Danish rule 1620-1845*, Tharangambadi, Tamil Nadu: Tranquebar Association.

Jørgensen, H. (2014), *Tranquebar – whose history? transnational cultural heritage in a former Danish trading colony in South India*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.

Lewis, O. (1965), Caste and the Jajmani System, *Village life in Northern India*, (ed.) Lewis, O, Vintage Books.

Madden R. (2010), *Being ethnographic: A guide to the theory and practice of ethnography*, London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Mallika Pinniyavathi, J. (2011), Early history of the missionary works of the royal Danish missionaries, the German and Swedish in different packets of Tamil Nadu: a historical perspective, *Journal of economics and sustainable development*, 2:5, retrieved from: <https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/JEDS/article/view/471/356> (last accessed on 20.05.2019)

Maria Lazar, P. (2010), *Tales of Tranquebar*, Karaikal, Puducherry: Vizhichudar Pathipsagam.

McCulloch, H. (1996), Sex, gender and Christian conversion in nineteenth-century South India, religious change, conversion and culture, *Sydney Studies*, 12, (ed.) L. Olson, Sydney: Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture.

Mosse, D. (2012) *The Saint in the banyan tree: Christianity and caste society in India*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Nilavendan, M. (2012), Archaeological excavation of Trangampadi (Tranquebar) at Danish Fort, *Indian streams research journal*, 2:8, (ed.) Yakkaldevi, A. & Jagtap H.N., Solapur, Maharashtra.

Ortner, Sherry (1974): Is female to male as nature to culture?, *Woman, culture and society*, (ed.) M. Z. Rosaldo & L. Lamphere, p. 68–87. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press

Ramberg, L. (2014), *Given to the goddess – South Indian devadasis and the sexuality of religion*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Rizvi, Md. M. A. (2005), Secularism in India: retrospect and prospects, *The Indian journal of political science*, 66:4, p. 901-914, Indian Political Science Association.

Schönbeck, O. (2012) *All religions merge in Tranquebar: religious coexistence and social cohesion in South India*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Spradley, J. (1980), *Participant observation*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson.

Sultan, M. A. (2012 [2003]), *Reminiscences of Tranquebar*, Tharangambadi: Tamil Nadi Tharangai Tamil Pathipagam.

Waldrop, A. (2004), Dalit politics in India and new meanings of caste in *Forum for development studies*, 2, p. 275-305.

Yanagisako, S. J. & Collier, J. F. (1987), Toward a unified analysis of gender and kinship, *Gender and kinship: essays toward a unified analysis*, (eds.) Collier, J. F. & Yanagisako, S. J., Stanford: Stanford University Press.